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The Tested Faith and the God of Love: The Eschatological Proviso in the Christian Conception of God[1]

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Since George Newlands gave me a copy of his 1980 book, *Theology of the Love of God*,[2] I have often reflected in admiration on the persistence with which he develops and expresses his conviction in this monograph and on his concern to verify his theology in the context of the life of faith. And truly, it is not the abstract statement that God is love, but the concrete experience of this love that characterizes the Christian faith. This is not because the abstract principle is unbelievable (it is far too void of content for that), but because the concrete experience of God can actually render it unbelievable: the experience of suffered (and performed) evil effectively falsifies the abstract principle that God is love.

It was in 1980 that I published my book, *Leiden – Erfahrung und Denken* or *Suffering: Experience and Reflection*.[3] In this work, I addressed various theoretical answers to the problem of evil and the significance of the innumerable and horrific incidences of human suffering for any reasonable conception of God, and even more for Christian faith in the love of God. The outcome of my analysis was the conclusion that the theodicies of both the Platonic and the modern-idealistic type not only failed, but from the perspective of Christian faith, were in fact constructed from a false perspective. The question of how to approach the problem of evil in a theologically appropriate way remained ever more important: 'How can one retain faith in the power of the love of God even in suffering?' In his book on the Christian conception of God, George Newlands speaks of the 'hidden presence' of God in creation and of the 'suffering presence' of God in the experience of human suffering.[4] Who would deny that God has promised us Christians – through his presence on the cross of Jesus Christ and again as revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ – that he will be near to us in the midst of our every tribulation and distress. But what are we to imagine when, struck mute from pain, we no longer experience and feel this promise in our hearts? It is possible that in this situation we feel not only a self-withdrawal and absence of God but, contrariwise, such a presence of him in which we are no longer able to recognize the voice and form of the love and generosity of God. We can tumble into a situation in which we cannot interpret the dealings of God as pedagogical testing, but dolefully perceive the

actions of God as affliction and even more as temptation to abandon our faith. It would seem as though the God of love has been overshadowed by a demonic mask of utter distain for his love. Where is there the 'love that will not let us go'?

I am convinced that our Christian conception of God does not allow us to suppress such experiences – experiences that have plagued many of the pious since biblical times and which even caused some to fall away from their faith. Rather, we must face these experiences and acknowledge them as a challenge to the theology of the love of God. Testing, afflictions, temptations: it is concerning these phenomena of the Christian life that I wish to respond to George Newlands in what follows.

Why should God test a person?

'Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting' (Ps. 139.23–24). The petition of the Psalmist presents a clear answer to this question. Since people are clearly not completely transparent (even the righteous), many of the pious in the Old Testament pray to be made certain of their integrity or innocence and wish to stand the test in the face of the enemies who accuse them. The Apostle too says that he does not speak to please men but God, 'who tests our heart' (1 Thess 2.4).

Nevertheless, this prayer is in a way odd. The above psalm affirms repeatedly that God already knows the innermost soul of the person. It is further remarkable that this petition is nowhere expressed in the New Testament; rather there we read: 'and lead us not into temptation' (Mt. 6.13). In the New Testament, 'testing' in a positive sense refers almost exclusively to the human activity, namely with reference to the ethical self-examination of life-conduct. What then does it mean that a man would fear the testing of God in the form of 'temptation'? And what does it mean that human behaviour is not governed solely by the commandments of God but must be more precisely guided by a 'renewed' sense: 'That ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God' (Rom. 12.2).[5]

Over the course of a long history, Christian dogmatics has again and again sought to differentiate these two aspects of the religious phenomenon of 'testing': the practical-ethical aspect (which concerns human behaviour) and the existential-religious aspect (which concerns one's relationship with God). The Reformation interpretation of the doctrine of justification clearly distinguishes between the testing of 'works' and the testing of the 'person', and accordingly also between God as legislator and God as conciliator in Jesus Christ. And thus the question of why God should test a man calls for an entirely different answer when posed from the perspective of the *law* or from the perspective of the *gospel*. In the sense of the former, it is to be expected that the legislator would have the right to test the obedience of those subject to his commands, even when it is possible for them to become the object of divine

sanctions of temporal and eternal judgement. But in the sense of the latter, it is equally clear that there is absolutely nothing to test, because the believer lives solely by faith in God, not by works attributable to him, whether good or bad. On this account, the anticipation of the Last Judgement holds nothing threatening for him, since Jesus Christ will be the judge. Christ will certainly test and evaluate the works of believers. But because the just will not be judged *according to* their works, they will be saved 'as by fire' that burns up evil works (1 Cor. 3.15).[6]

But even with the distinction of 'faith' and 'works' in place, our question is not yet really answered. Without denying that one should strive to 'grow' in faith and sanctification, Reformation theology affirms (against every pastorally and pedagogically motivated objection) that the Christian must live his entire life *in concreto* within the agonizing coexistence of these two realities: *simul justus simul peccator*. It is one thing to subscribe to the distinction between the person as sinner in practice but as justified and accepted by God (a distinction grasped only by faith); but the still possible experience of being tested by God is another thing altogether. This latter experience is far more alarming than the moral testing of the sinner, because it encounters him who has already been justified. What was once perceived as an indisputable right of the law-giver now slips into the twilight of doubt, and the believer can only ask whether God's consolation in the gospel were in fact ever offered unconditionally. This no longer concerns the success or failure of human obedience to the law but rather the validity of our confidence in a sinner-accepting God! How could such a test of our confidence in God make sense, a confidence that derives all of its certainty *extra se* in divine consolation? It seems impossible that God could be the author of such an experience. When such an experience does occur, it signifies something greater than and different from mere testing, which nonetheless may prove insightful for the tested individual and for which he even may ask. The Luther Bible expresses this with the terms '*Anfechtung*' and '*Versuchung*'; the New Revised Standard Version, for example, employs the terms 'trial' (e.g. Mt. 26.41) and 'temptation' (e.g. 1 Tim. 6.9). The multiplicity of the terminology used to translate the single New Testament root-word (*peirasmos*) is a linguistic indication of the complexity of the problem at hand.

Without a doubt, the experience of having the certainty of one's faith afflicted – i.e. the experience of falling into temptation as *Christians* – played a special role in Reformation piety and the theological reflection it spawned. The question at the centre of Luther's theology concerned the certainty of faith, and his explanations of the doctrine of justification are always aimed at overcoming doubt in God. In this context, testing by God becomes not only more complex than moral inspection but also more intensive – this testing (which is menacing, after all) is an inner testing in the *conscience*. This testing does not only uncover moral vices such as gluttony, greediness and the craze for fame (as the tradition taught), but even distrust of God, little faith and despair. Still more intensely than the ancient distinction of *tentatio interior* and *tentatio exterior*, Reformation piety is focused on the experience of dread – a dread that

falls upon the examined conscience as an awareness of inescapable guilt and upon the sinner who faces the God who punishes with death. 'O Lord, rebuke me not in thine anger' (Ps. 6.1). Although the victory over these *terrores conscientiae* is worked out by God (who justifies in exchange for absolutely nothing), faith in Christ does not simply end the experience of dread – the *agon conscientia* continues in a lifelong penance that deadens the 'old man' and enlivens the 'new man' and comforts and frees the 'anxious conscience' again and again. In this way, the question concerning why and to what end God would test a man was answered in the dogmatic treatise *de poenitentia*.[7]

As considered in the context of Christian faith, our question does not become invalid, but ever more perplexing. In Reformation piety, the inner testing of the conscience ('spiritual affliction') is elevated to such importance that it not only signifies the 'cross' that every Christian has to bear but is even referred to as the 'high and secret suffering of the conscience' and 'golden suffering'. Luther stated paradoxically that 'the most dangerous affliction' is when one experiences 'no affliction at all'.[8] At this point, we can see that a cursory answer to our question is simply not possible. In order to understand the precise meaning of being 'tested' by God, we must examine this concept in association with 'afflictions' ('trials') and 'temptations'.

Testing as a pedagogical measure

Even long before the Reformation, there was never a shortage of theological attempts to reduce the complexity of our question to a simpler constellation, i.e. to the principle of divine discipline. This model of divine testing was for a long time in the minority, but being pious, rational and free from internal contradictions, it became after all the dominant model. Since the time of the Church Father, Irenaeus of Lyon, the essence of the theory's structure has been altered very little.

The idea that God tests men for pedagogical reasons and with an aim to advance their own best interests can be found in the Bible, for instance, in the historical-theological interpretation of the wilderness wanderings of the people of Israel in the Old Testament (Dt. 8.2–6), in the wisdom discourse of Job's friends (Job 4–37), and above all in the Pauline depiction of salvation history as a 'schoolmaster to bring us into Christ' (Gal. 3.24). Reformation theology never doubted the *usus paedagogicus legis*. Furthermore, the conception of a divine *oeconomia salutis* – a salvation history in which Christianity found itself the heir to the Old Testament – contains a pedagogical element. This element is established dogmatically in the treatise *providentia Dei*, a treatise that interrelates the biblical witness to the faithfulness of God and stoic rationality.[9] In the Irenaean tradition, the pedagogy of God is universalized and thereby functions as an alternative to the *apocalyptic* model of salvation history, i.e. the model of a cosmic redemption drama in which God and evil battle over the souls of men – an idea that dominated during New Testament times and a great deal of church history. This drama, and its resolution in the Last Judgement

(and its twofold outcome), is avoided in the modern rendition of the Irenaean model through the teleology of the divine pedagogy. After the fading of the apocalyptic horizon, we see the appearance of an initially pious but later also 'philosophical' Chiliasm. This movement transformed the stage of the drama of salvation into a *schoolroom*, in which the divine schoolmaster tests his pupils in order to measure out rewards and punishments. The enlightenment pedagogy integrated every conception of testing into a teleology of the destiny of men as free agents; theology of that time framed God's testing, too, within '*Bildung zur Humanität*', as Johann Gottfried Herder put it. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing penned the classic answer to our question in 1777 in his treatise, 'The Education of Mankind'.[10]

The pedagogical answer to the question of why God should test a man renders a complex problem ascertainable in a theoretical sense and applicable in a practical sense. It renders the visage of God unambiguous before the background of the 'dark sides' of God,[11] which in a classic reception of the Bible had an enormous repressive effect on those tested by hunger, plague, war and other misfortunes. The anger and vengeance, brutality and despotism of God were then suspended; the reconciliation of sinful humanity with God by God himself came to be perceived as a reconciliation of fallible people with an all-loving God. What was once called the anger of God is in truth pedagogical wisdom. The Last Judgement was no longer associated with Hell, but was now considered a merely disciplinary action promoting the development and purification of the human race. This notion, as well as that of a subsequent universal reconciliation, had already been rejected in the condemnation of the doctrines of Origen by the Early Church, and the Reformation maintained this position. Nevertheless, it is a position that has been widely renewed in the chiliastically and pedagogically oriented modernity: a modernity morally outraged at the concept of divine anger and the vindictiveness of eternal damnation.[12] But this also is an ultimately inadequate answer to the question concerning the possibly ambivalent meaning of the testing of God.

The first objection to this pedagogical reduction points out that, in direct recourse to the divine pedagogic, the disciplinary method (i.e. the criteria of the testing) plays a decisive role: do these methods and criteria correspond with the final purposes of God? If one is to understand these final purposes not only as the improvement or perfection of humanity, but as 'reconciliation' and 'salvation' (and this is the consensus of Christian theology), then how can one ascribe not only the fulfilment of need but also the overcoming of negativity to these final purposes? Formulated in a different way, the question runs: what role does the delivery of the biblical law as divine disciplinary means play for Christians? This question has never been consistently answered. Such an answer was not to be expected already in view of the Reformation thesis that it is precisely Christians who can and ought to set up 'new Decalogues'; and the modern thesis of moral autonomy and the existential-theological ethics of love also does not evade the dilemma of nomism and antinomism. In addition, it aggravates the situation that (in the modern theory of natural law) the intrinsic

authority of laws and their authority due to the sovereignty of the legislator have been separated. The most recent theological efforts, which strive for a positive answer both to the questions of *why* and *how* God should test a person, are only now at a beginning.[13]

Another objection derives from the fact that the pure pedagogical answer to our question refers back to a monotheism of natural law, a monotheism that comprehends the dealings of God only in the linear logic of the disciplinary purpose that is founded in his being and one that permits only tactical variances. This monotheism can enter into competition with the conception of God as Trinity (as is demonstrated by historical theology), according to which God himself has accomplished the testing decisive for salvation history at the cross – the judgement of the human race. Man cannot judge on this judgement, because no standard exists except God's self-definition. However, the pedagog-ical-teleological logic of monotheism, and its correlation of two acting subjects, creates the possibility of inverting the subject and object of the testing: the divine tester himself becomes the one being tested. The objects of the divine discipline can judge for themselves whether the disciplining subject acts consis-tently in terms of his pedagogical rationality. This possibility has been adopted widely in modern times. So long as God's pupils had sufficient reasons to affirm their pedagogical relationship with God, they defended their theories concern-ing this relationship. To use a better-known word, they forged a theodicy. The modern theodicy (which finds its beginnings in the writings of Gottfried William Leibniz), of course, attempts to demonstrate that the creator and sustainer of the world is not to be faulted for the pedagogically dysfunctional phenomena within it, but that God tolerates such evils (which are caused by man, in the morally crucial sense) as a part of the best possible world. In his wise *providence*, without ever willing the existence of evil, God permits it as an inevitable possibility springing from human liberty, prevents further evil, restricts evil consequences, and directs the whole process towards the good. This is all to say that God causes evil to serve to achieve his pedagogical purposes.[14]

Certainly, the possibility of inverting the subject and object of the testing exists, but man's choice to test God had a high price. Man was not allowed to bear his complaint to God any longer about being tested by him in a test that seemed unfair. Rather, because it is God's intention to direct everything a priori to the best possible end, a person must, in as far as he or she is able, effect the optimum in the particular situation. In the idealistic version of this theodicy, this activism is somewhat removed from the individual in order to advance the entire race. On the other hand, the prohibition against accusing God is further intensified: all claims of the individual to be treated in a pedagogically mean-ingful way or decently at all are considered to be unauthorized, since the indi-vidual is believed to have no purpose other than to be sacrificed for the sake of the greater good: the significance of the individual is to be slaughtered in the slaughterhouse of history. The topos of Friedrich Schiller – according to whom the history of the world is in fact the Last Judgement – shows us precisely the

price that a consistent pedagogical model of salvation history that lacks dramatic-contingent elements must pay in the end.[15]

Testing and temptation

The theological problem and our question of why, how and to what end God should test a person, cannot be purely limited to pedagogical teleology. In what respect do these experiences (which we express here with the terms 'trials' or 'afflictions' and 'temptations') defy the pedagogical relationship between God and man?

To begin with, one should take into account that Christian experience always has a temporal index, one which can neither be reduced teleologically nor to an orientation to a particular purpose. Thus the specific Christian formulation of the theodicy problem always exhibits a time structure. It transforms the question 'why?' into a prospective 'how long?' (Ps. 13.2). For the time being, this means the renunciation of the testing of the divine tester, but the question still claims the right to bear a complaint before God, such as measuring the current actions of God against the past actions of God. The complaint certainly is not based on the logic of a 'salvation plan', for that would hardly differ from the teleological rationality which a disciplinary programme must show at any time. The complaint before God and the courage to express it is rather based on earlier experiences of his care, and it entails certain expectations that stem from now remembered 'promises'. Experiences of disappointed expectations, however, at least in this context, cannot be legitimately introduced into the understanding of an *a priori* appropriate testing by God. Complaints about God (but nevertheless directed to God) assume the form of an urgent request for the further action of God: 'O my help, come quickly to my aid!' (Ps. 22.20).[16]

It is just as important to consider the dissimilarities that exist between the various Christian experiences of God that emerge in the discrepancies between 'testing', 'trials', or 'afflictions' and 'temptations'. The semantic variance is certainly not identical to a conceptual distinction. All three expressions have been used as collective or generic terms for all three meanings: in Latin (*experimentum, afflictio, tentatio*) as well as in German and English. We see this most clearly in reference to the two Greek terms for testing: *dokimazein* ('to try') and *peirazein* ('to tempt'). These terms, which appear frequently in the Septuagint and in the New Testament, also share a common semantic field that can be expressed with the terms 'attempt' or 'trial'. What is actually meant within this large range of possibilities can only be determined precisely when one fully considers their contexts and the various and evolving constellations of the participants. The life-stories of the faithful provide extremely rich (and, admittedly, far too often unexplored) illustrative material for further reflection.[17]

If dogmatic theology expresses itself at all concerning our question of why and to what end God should test a man, it is strained to cope with the nuances found in experience.[18] But the question cannot be escaped: why should the God

of love test those who trust in his gospel in regard to their faith, even leading some to disbelief? Dogmatic theology has therefore often tried to defuse the complexity of the question.

In doing so, it proceeded from the biblical findings that the experience of such a testing by God belongs to the faith, and that it is accompanied by a strict self-testing, so that its sense is recognizable for the one being tested: its character is determined by God himself and therefore is apprehensible to himself and others. Therefore, he can confidently go through such a test and understand that the tribulation is perhaps occurring as an occasion for probation – a probation that is of greater validity than a testing according to human judgement. This is particularly emphasized by the Apostle Paul and is disputed especially in the churches he founded. The frequently used metaphor for the testing by God is, therefore, that of the burning and painful but purifying fire.[19] Theology always set a high value on distinguishing this reasonable approving probation from the tests and temptations of faith, and this was often expressed with the generic term 'temptation'. And thus Augustine, who for a long time remained the dominant authority on that subject, differentiates between *tentatio seductionis* (bewitchment or seduction to disbelief and to evil) and *tentatio probationis* (the testing of faith for its own benefit). Peter Lombard further clarified this concept by assigning the various possible purposes of a 'temptation' to separate authors: *Tentat enim Deus ut erudiat* [!], *tentat homo ut discat, quod nescit, Diabolus tentat ut seducat* (For God tests in order to teach, man tests in order to learn, the devil tests in order to seduce).[20] One can only speak of 'temptation' in the problematic sense of seduction to evil and apostasy from God when the devil himself is involved.

But it is still not quite that simple. Biblical semantics differentiate even between the 'testing' of a divine and human subject. It is true that humans can test what God's will is and what the good among many possibilities of action is, but they cannot really test God (i.e. they cannot expose him to any probation, let alone any purification). And yet, they can 'put God to the test' (i.e. try to tempt God and seek to discover from him what they do not yet know in order to attain what they do not yet possess). This is in fact the primary meaning of 'temptation' (*nsh, peirazein, tentare*). The scholastic definition (which is not coincidentally formulated in a demonological fashion) reads: *Tentare est proprie experimentum sumere de aliquo* (In the proper sense of the word, to test is to take an experiment from someone).[21] Until the seventeenth century, the terms *peirasmos* and *tentatio* were translated in German as '*Versuchnis*'. It was only then that the term 'experiment' (pertaining to things) differentiated itself linguistically from the *Versuchung* (pertaining to persons). It is precisely the experimental *Versuchnis* of God that is forbidden both in the Old and in the New Testament. On the one hand, the New Testament thereby quotes the Old Testament, therefore referring to the prohibition against reducing God to an idol and extending to the prohibition against tempting Christ (i.e. trying to know and have even more from God than is known and received from him through Christ).[22]

Thus a person cannot have an experimental relationship with God, and ought not to attempt to have one. But does not God, for his part, have an experimental relationship with humans, as evidenced by the way he tests saints like Job, or at least consents to them being tested? And at any rate, would not that diametrically contradict what he delivers to humans (and thereby creating confidence) in Christ? Thus the question of the author of temptations assumes a new severity in the New Testament, since it no longer concerns only the question of obedience to the law and discipline. The answer to this question is rendered in different ways, so that one can only wonder whether it is *God* who authors the temptation and to whom consequently one is to address the petition, 'and lead us not into temptation' (Mt. 6.13) – God, who 'tempted' Abraham and whimsically commanded him to sacrifice the promise-bearer Isaac (Gen. 22.1: a narrative of crucial importance in Pauline theology)? Or was it *Satan*, the 'tempter', who through his conscious and unconscious accomplices (as seen in the lifelong temptations of Jesus) tempts the human race? Or is it *man*, whose *concupiscentia* allows the possibility of being tempted to be realized as temptation through his unsatisfied needs?[23] As we at last read in the epistle of James: 'Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man. But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed' (Jas 1.13–14).

Christian theology mostly followed the New Testament by denying that God could be the author of temptations to evil; however, in all other respects, it left the question of the authorship unanswered. Because temptations are present everywhere and never long in coming: *Temptatio est vita humana super terram* (The life of man on earth is full of temptation) (as Augustine says in reference to the Satan of the book of Job, who roves through the country and reports back to God).[24] But the temptations which Jesus Christ had to suffer, as he journeyed from the desert to the Garden of Gethsemane, guarantee that it is not really God but enmity against God that actuates evil temptations. The temptations the divine man really felt and bore (not only for pedagogical reasons) and passed through when abandoned by God and facing Hell (see Heb. 2.17–18 and 4.15) are the guarantee that one is not inevitably forced to surrender to temptation and to break with faith in Christ and follow the path of evil, although seduction and internal involvement with sin fatally cooperate in humans. The formula inspired by the New Testament for this causative syndrome and in use for many centuries is *caro, mundus, diabolus* (the flesh, the world and the devil). Luther's catechism too explains the sixth petition of the prayer that Jesus taught us in this way:

Gott versücht zwar niemand, aber wir bitten in diesem Gebet, dass uns Gott wollt behüten und erhalten, auf dass uns der Teufel, die Welt und unser Fleisch nicht betriege und verführe in Missglauben, Verzweifeln und ander grosse Schande und Laster und, ob wir damit angefochten würden, dass wir doch endlich gewinnen und den Sieg behalten.[25]

Exonerating God of the charge that he would *tempt* a man, however, does not yet eliminate all concerns in respect to God *testing* a man. Nonetheless, although 'the devil, the world and the flesh' are already defeated in Christ (but able to continue their menacing as long as the 'old Adam' continues to live within this 'old world'), the divine providence and its permission on its part has the responsibility for permitting them to act until the Last Judgement (while yet setting boundaries and limits to their temptations). Subsequent to the warning against tempting Christ and thereby perishing at the hand of the 'Destroyer', the Apostle Paul writes: 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it' (1 Cor. 10.12–13). The last sentence clearly refers to more than the previous sentence, which speaks of human temptation. But to what precisely is this statement alluding?

Afflictions and temptations

Immediately before the verse quoted from the epistle of James ('Let no man say when he is tempted . . .'), we read: 'Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him' (Jas 1.12). In his translation of this verse, Luther rendered *peirasmos* with the word 'affliction' (*Anfechtung*), although he selected the word 'temptation' (*Versuchung*) in the very next verse, and thus it remains still in the revised text of the 1984 Luther Bible. The King James version employs the terms 'tried' and 'tempted'. We shall now turn to examine Luther's distinction of temptations (*tentatio*) and afflictions or trials (*afflictio*).

One could, like Søren Kierkegaard, attribute the temptation 'from below' to the devil and to his will for destruction, and the affliction 'from above' to the testing of God, which is directed towards the good. However, since the question is regarding the very same experience (even if its significance is still ambiguous), one could as well say that this distinction cannot be introduced in a theologically sound way.[26] In a purely conceptual sense, this distinction may remain undemonstrated and only relative to the development of the experience of Christian faith: the definition of a time 'hereafter' could then be the reason for Luther's different translation. If one takes the temporal structure of God's relationship as being substantial, then one could differentiate in such a way. Where the temptation has not reached its goal of diverting from faith in God (being clear *ex post*), it is perceived by the one being tested as an affliction which strengthens his faith (although the process may be horrifying) and purifies it into an ever more simple, absolute confidence in God; the one being tested then may even attribute this affliction to God. The specificity of temptation *ex ante* is its menacing ability to conceal the identity of the tempter. The exemplary story for this is the fight of Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok with

'someone'. His opponent is not by any means an angel, as many hermeneutical and iconographic clarifications wanted to make him out to be. Only in the end do we discover that Jacob did not in fact wrestle with a demon but with God (Gen. 32.25–31).[27]

The request of the prayer of Jesus (who himself was tempted) shows a trace of the dramatic distinction between temptations and afflictions: 'And lead us not into temptation' (Mt. 6.13). It certainly addresses God as the one who possibly tempts. As Jesus in the Gethsemane scene commands the disciples, 'Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter (in Luther's German: *fallt*) into temptation' (Mk 14.38), so the theological tradition has reduced Jesus' 'lead into'(!) to a mere 'not fall into'. The new English translations follow this tradition. Such a clearing of the image of God, however, comes too soon, for it would require an a priori knowledge of God in order to be able to exclude from the beginning that God does not tempt to evil. Our journey with God rather goes on, because in Jesus' prayer (as it appears in Matthew) the petition that God lead us not into temptation is coupled with the request: 'but deliver us from evil'. Only after the fulfilment of this petition too can it be said with certainty, and in a renewed confidence in God, that God does not tempt to evil. Life as known in this salvation-historical period in between the 'already' and the 'not yet' (i.e. between the vision of Jesus Christ and his return at the end of all time) is continually besieged by temptations, whose author cannot be identified clearly as the causing subject.

It is therefore also appropriate to follow the biblical language in speaking of 'authorities and principalities' of temptation and (in cases of success) their reign over humans. After a time of 'demythologizing' these figures of speech (which were not, after all, constitutionally Christian), the painful proposition again recommends itself that these temptations are in fact seductions to evil, which cannot be explained from the sum of the actions of responsible persons. Who or what would be the subject of a willing, acting and moral purpose if humans (whether voluntarily or involuntarily) yielded to the ever impressive seduction that leads to complete bondage and slavery, and thus found themselves ensnared in a net, ceding ear, hand and reason to evil that generates more evil?[28] Also the personal representation of the temptation to the evil as 'Satan' does not identify such a subject. The devil is not (!) an article of the faith; but rather an imaginative condensation of the experiences of threats which cannot be dissolved for the time being on a binary logic or a linear causality between subjects of wilful action and thus be banned. The alternative of 'fiction' and 'reality' is not yet decided in such a situation; it is realistic to be afraid of the devil as seduction to the refusal of the foolishness of faith in Christ, of the liberty of the children of God in favour of security by knowledge and acting 'like God', actually in favour of the enforcement of the supposed good through power instead of love. Therefore in the modern times the temptation always considered worst was the one by the 'Antichrist'.[29]

One can therefore differentiate the dramatic and ambivalent experience process of 'testing' in such a way: the use of the word 'temptation' reflects

prospectively the concern, one could yield to the seduction to distrust God, to break the first commandment, and thus to be bound,[3•] and all out of a supposed interest in liberty. Retrospectively, the word reflects the mourning over having yielded to such a seduction against all reason and all faith. It does, however, attribute this to no 'other' in order to assign oneself the role of victim instead of author – this would be precisely to sign a pact with the devil! The question is rather, whether one was and would be strong enough in faith, to send each devil with Christ into the desert: 'Away with you, Satan!' (Mt. 4.10).[31] By the way, the Reformation piety stressed such an *apotropaic gestus* in contrast to the older advice to imitate the patience of Christ; and it did not regard the necessary strength in faith as *virtus heroica*, not as 'works', but purely as 'faith', i.e. as the quoting of the gospel regardless of its own capability and feeling (just as Christ defeated the devil not by acts but by the word of God) – the devil can successfully be fought by making him ridiculous.[32]

The use of the word 'affliction' also reflects concerns and difficulties; but in contrast to the radical '*Versuchlichkeit*' of man, exhibits the insight of the believer that he is often only weak or idle in his confidence in God, and that he would rather have possessions and security than to have to rely completely on God. In the light of being *simul iustus et peccator*, a Christian must reckon with afflictions by God, so that his faith is strengthened; they belong to the *militia Christi* in this age. The Christian faith therefore is substantially 'afflicted faith', in the sense of the request: 'I believe, help my unbelief!' (Mk 9.24).[33] Religious afflictions are nevertheless a 'cross', because through them God causes suffering, thus acting 'contrary' to what he wants in his love. In this concrete instance, however, he does not do what his love promises to do, but performs an *opus alienum*. Such afflictions (stemming from his hiddenness in the cross of Christ) shouldn't be attributed to the devil, but to God. They seem to be divine punishments and signs of divine anger, and in a particular case, they very well may be so; but they should be regarded (so the Reformation confessions affirm, in contrast to the tradition) as 'signs of grace'. Understood in this way, 'affliction' has become dogmatic doctrine in the traditional Protestant theology: *de calamitatibus et de cruce et de veris consolationibus*.[34]

A limitation to the theological knowledge of God

In keeping with tradition, Reformation piety also differentiated between trials by God (which are for the benefit of the one being tested) and trials by the devil (which are designed to lead to ruin). But when distinguishing between 'temptations' and 'afflictions', it was never a question of differing actions by two different actors. In particular, Luther was courageous enough to call the contingency and ambiguity of any trial by God by name.

It is the nature of the wisdom of faith to differentiate God from 'masks' under which he reigns over the world by his 'regiment to the left' (and such masks can be all creatures), and it is to be reckoned as a strength of faith to grasp under God's 'No' (the 'cross') his 'Yes'; there are, however, at the borders

of faith also temptations leading even to disbelief. They arise, where also the faithful in Christ do not know an answer to what they must at the same time attribute to the acting of the almighty God, as long as they still believe in God at all. As is described in *De servo arbitrio* (1525), here the problem of theodicy (as it was later called) emerges, now aggravated by the question concerning the particularity of God's electing only a few individuals. This is thus a radical temptation: God contradicts himself in his own clear promise of salvation, for example, in the command to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22), or in the impenitence of Judas (Mt. 27.3ff.). When we seem to meet the God who (also for Christians) inextricably 'effects life, death and everything in everything', so that also the believer doesn't seem to be able to differentiate God and the devil, and God himself seems to become his enemy – then we are being tempted to disbelief by the devil in the mask of the *Deus actuosissimus*. We are involved with the Almighty in his 'absolute majesty', we are met 'naked' by the 'naked God' – and are on the verge of losing all trust in God's love. However, this 'hidden' (or better, 'self-hiding') God wants to remain hidden and does not at all want to be recognized: in the light of the gospel, this *Deus absconditus* (contrary to the God revealing himself in Christ) doesn't concern us: *nihil ad nos*. Therefore the rule also holds: 'To search for God outside of Jesus Christ – this is the devil.'[35]

The formula 'hidden God' would be very much misunderstood if it were regarded as the one side of a symmetrical distinction, i.e. between a hidden and an obvious God. The result would be a false dilemma between a Manichaean double concept of God (Werner Elert chose this way) and the christomonistic abolition of the distinction (Karl Barth's tendency). Luther's distinction meant, however, not a specification of a generic 'God', but the demarcation of the theologically understandable from the theologically incomprehensible. *Deus absconditus* and *actualis omnipotentia* are 'border terms', which cannot become subject to theological knowledge, but delimit a border where even faith can encounter a deadly incomprehensibility of God. This limit can only be realized *ex negativo* in the apprehension and appellation of the God *revealed* in Christ. That fatal 'hiddenness' of God may, therefore, under no circumstances be confounded with the salvific 'hiddenness' of God in the cross of Christ, which is after all a characteristic of the revelation of God in Christ. Like the Canaanite woman whose confidence in Jesus is challenged by him, a Christian holds onto the deep, hidden 'Yes' under and above the 'No' with firm faith in God's word (quite in contrast to Eve's 'Did God really say . . .?' [Gen. 3.1]). Luther concludes: *est autem haec omnis tentationis origo et caput, cum de verbo et Deo ratio by se iudicare conatur sine verbo* (This is the source and head of all temptation: when reason by itself attempts to judge the Word and God without the Word).[36]

It is, however, an experience of faith on the way with God in the period of time in which faith has not yet become sight that the definiteness of 'his' God is still controverted. The faith, as Luther concludes at the end of *De servo arbitrio*, can interpret its experiences in the *lumen gratiae*, exceeding the possibilities of the *lumen naturae*; the believer must, however, postpone a complete

insight into the God whose actions are in complete harmony (being 'his' God) with the *lumen gloriae*.[37] The fact that the Christian faith in God is confronted with the border phenomenon of the *Deus absconditus* leaves the question of why God would seem to lead into temptation without an answer in this age. The thoroughgoing temptation to despair of God has no theoretical explanation. The Christian faith has 'only' a practical answer, corresponding to the life with God within time. The ambiguity and obscurity of divine action in general can only be met in the flight from the 'hidden' to the 'revealed' God. This *ad Deum contra Deum confugere* is at the same time a resistance (insisting on the gospel word of God) against the diabolical 'ape' of the 'naked God'. It is a contest of faith over the unambiguity of God, exhibited in the gospel of 'I am your God': a contest in which we bear our complaints to God and plead with him to renew this promise.[38]

Will George Newlands agree with this dramatic view of Christian faith? Well, my view is not the entire view, and I would not present it as absolute, since I am also aware of the importance of the divine presence and providence, which provides its own perspective. Although I hold the distinction in the 'hiddenness' of God as of utmost importance, I nevertheless agree with him that, in any case, 'the appropriate response to God's hidden love is prayer'.[39] Also George Newlands does not ignore the eschatological proviso to which faith in the presence of God hidden in Christ is subject. Indeed, his poignant thesis, 'to live *coram Deo*, before God, *etsi Deus non daretur*, may be part of a particular form of Christian commitment',[40] is in the context of the post-theistic age not so far from what Luther called in a theistic age *Deus absconditus*, as if it were a 'non-place'. In addition, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (so esteemed by George Newlands) was one of the not too many theologians after Luther and Kierkegaard who grappled seriously with the experience of faith being tested, afflicted and tempted, and he did that interestingly enough in a 'biblical work over temptation' (1938).[41]

Thus I assume that George, celebrating his jubilee year, will not deny completely that the Christian faith, *Deo providente*, may be also 'afflicted faith' in this age. Should then a Christian not contend with God's word against his own prepotent cupidities afflicting him, against the bewitching 'authorities and principalities', and against the temptations of the devil as a seemingly divine voice of the will to power? As an experienced theologian, he will certainly also not deny that, besides requesting illumination from the holy spirit (*oratio*) and the discipline of interpreting the word of God (*meditatio*), the affliction that we experience in this life (*tentatio*) is prerequisite for our spiritual formation (according to Luther, these are the three exercises that form a good theologian): 'Die ist der Prüfestein, die leret dich nicht allein wissen und verstehen, sondern auch erfaren, wie recht, wie warhafftig, wie süsse, wie lieblich, wie mechtig, wie tröstlich Gottes Wort sei, weisheit über alle weisheit.'[42]

Notes

1. I wish to express my gratitude to the translators of my (very German) text, Helga Neike and Jonathan Armstrong.
2. George Newlands, *Theology of the Love of God* (London: Collins, 1980).
3. Walter Sparn, *Leiden – Erfahrung und Denken. Materialien zum Theodizeeproblem* (Munich: Kaiser, 1980).
4. George Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), pp. vii, 194, 196.
5. Cf. Phil. 1.10; Eph. 5.10; or 1 Thess. 5.21–22.
6. The broad consensus denies that the Last Judgement is to be interpreted as an administration of punishment, but speaks rather of a purifying judgement. Cf. Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik*, 2nd edn (Berlin/NewYork: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 610–26; Eberhard Jüngel speaks directly of an 'act of grace': *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen als Zentrum des christlichen Glaubens*, 3rd edn (Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), pp. 71–4.
7. It was introduced by Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci communes* (1521); psychologically plausibly presented in the *Confessio Augustana* (1530), IV, and in *Apologia Confessionis*, IV, XII, and by John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (1559), III.3.
8. Martin Luther, *Sermon* (1522) in *WA*, pp. 10, 3, 336; *Von den guten Werken* (1520), *WA*, pp. 6, 223. Cf. Horst Beintker, 'Anfechtung', III, in *TRE* 2 (1978): 699–700.
9. Cf. Johannes Köhler, 'Vorsehung', in *HWPh*, 11 (2001): 1206–8; Arnulf von Scheliha, *Der Glaube an die göttliche Vorsehung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999); Reinold Bernhardt, *Was heisst, 'Handeln Gottes'? Eine Rekonstruktion der Lehre von der Vorsehung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999).
10. Cf. Walter Sparn, 'Religiöse und theologische Aspekte der Bildungsgeschichte im Zeitalter der Aufklärung', in Ulrich Herrmann (ed.), *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte*, Vol. 2 (Munich: Beck, 2005), pp. 145–53.
11. Cf. The exegetical and systematic analysis of Walter Dietrich and Christian Link, *Die dunklen Seiten Gottes*, Vol. 1: *Willkür und Gewalt* (Neukirchen-Vlugn: Neukirchener, 1995); Ralf Miggelbrink, *Der zornige Gott: Die Bedeutung einer anstossigen Biblischen Tradition* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002); Stefan Volkmann, *Der Zorn Gottes: Studien zur Rede vom Zorn Gottes in der evangelischen Theologie* (Marbug: Elwert, 2004).
12. Cf. Hartmut Rosenau, *Allversöhnung: ein transzendentaltheologischer Grundlegungsversuch*, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993); Christine Janowski, *Allerlösung. Annäherungen an eine entdualisierte Eschatologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2000).
13. Summarized by Heikki Räisänen, 'Gesetz III. Neues Testament', in *RGG*, 4th edn, 3 (2002): 848–50; Walter Sparn, 'Gesetz IV. Dogmatisch und ethisch', in *RGG*, 4th edn, 3 (2002): 850–4.
14. Cf. Walter Sparn, 'Zulassung', in *HWPh*, 12 (2005): 1436–9.
15. Cf. Odo Marquard, 'Entlastungen. Theodizeemotive in der neuzeitlichen Philosophie' (1983) in *Zukunft braucht Herkunft* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003), pp. 124–45; Walter Sparn, 'Theodizee V.VI', in *RGG*, 4th edn, 8 (2005): 228–35.
16. One frequently finds these formulations or similar ones in the Psalter, e.g. Pss 31.3; 38.23; 40.14; 69.8; 70.2–6; 71.12; 141.1; it is significant that we do not find these formulas in the New Testament: *post Christum natum*, they are transformed into the petition: *veni creator spiritus*. Cf. Oswald Bayaer, 'Zur Theologie der Klage', *JBT*, 16 (2001): 289–301.
17. The advancement of research is shown by Oswald Bayer, 'Versuchung', *HWPh*, 11 (2001): 951–5; Johann A. Steiger, 'Versuchung III', in *TRE*, 35 (2003): 52–64.
18. Cf. Horst Beintker, 'Anfechtung, IV', in *TRE*, 2 (1978): 704–8; Oswald Bayer,

'Versuchung', *HWPh*, 11 (2001): 954, n. 16; Eric O. Springsted, 'Versuchung IV', in *TRE*, 35 (2003): 65.

19. Cf. W. Günther *et al.*, 'Versuchung/Bewährung', in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament* (Wuppertal: Neukirchener, 2000), pp. 1783–1809; and Erik Aurelius, 'Versuchunge I', *TRE*, 35 (2003): 44–7; Martin Klein, 'Versuchung', in *TRE*, 35 (2003): 47–52.

20. Aurelius Augustinus, *Quaestiones in Heptaemeron*, II: 58 (*CSEL*, 33: 96); Petrus Lombardus, *Comm. in Ps 25:2* (*MPL*, 191: 230).

21. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, I q 114 a 2 c.

22. Mt. 4.7 cites Dt. 6.16; 1 Cor. 10.9 and alludes to Ps. 78.18; Heb. 3.8 alludes to Ps 98.8–9; Acts 5.9; 15.10.

23. Cf. Eilert Herms, 'Versuchung IV.V', in *RGG*, 4th edn, 8 (2003): 1072–4.

24. Aurelius Augustinus, *Confessiones*, X: 18; with reference to Job 1.7, perhaps also to 1 Pet. 5.8.

25. God certainly does not tempt anyone, but we pray in this prayer that God would protect and keep us, lest the devil, the world and our flesh ensnare us in disbelief, despair and other grievous disgraces and vices; and even if faced with this [we pray] that we may overcome in the end and attain the victory. (Martin Luther, *Kleiner Kechismus* [1529], Our Father, sixth petition)
    Note the similarity with John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (1559), III: 20, 20.

26. Oswald Bayer, 'Anfechtung', *RGG*, 4th edn, 1 (1998): 478; 954, n.16.

27. Cf. Hermann Spieckermann, *Der Gotteskampf. Jakob und der Engel in Bibel und Kunst* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1997).

28. Cf. Thomas Zeilinger, *Zwischen Räume. Theologie der Mächte und Gewalten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1999).

29. Cf. Hans-Josef Klauck, Volker Leppin, Martin George, Walter Sparn, 'Antichrist', *RGG*, 4th edn, 1 (1998): 531–6.

30. Bondage, the choice of *servum arbitrium*, and the confounding of the roles of perpetrator and victim is especially clearly expressed by Oswald Bayer, 'Verführbarkeit/Verführung', RGG, 4th edn, 8 (2005): 994–6.

31. We owe to Karl Barth the renewal of a 'demonology' (a word leading to misunderstanding) that overcomes the alternative of mythology and rationality by referring to the *'Nichtiges'* excluded by God in the election of Christ, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/3 (Zollikon/Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1950), §51, §51, 3; cf. Walter Sparn, 'Teufel', VII.VII, *RGG*, 4th edn, 8 (2005): 188–90.

32. This is stressed by Johann A. Steiger, 'Versuchung', pp. 56–7, n.16, referring to Martin Luther's 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God'.

33. See the classic presentation by Carl Heinz Ratschow, *Der angefochtete Glaube* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1957; 5th edn, 1983); for the historical and systematic understanding of faith in Reformation theology, see Martin Seils, *Glaube* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996).

34. *Apologia Confessionis* (1530) XII: 157–8; *Formula Concordiae*, SD XI: 48ff.; Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci praecipui theologici* (1559); Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici* (1625), XV.

35. Martin Luther, *De servo arbitrio*, WA, 50: 685–6, 709–12; *extra Iesum quaerere Deum est diabolus*, WA, 40 III: 337; cf. Thomas Reinhuber, 'Deus absconditus/Deus revelatus', *RGG*, 4th edn, 2 (1999): 683–4; Wolf Krötke, 'Verborgenheit Gottes', *RGG*, 4th edn, 8 (2005): 938–41.

36. Martin Luther, WA, 17, 2, 32ff.; *Lectures on Genesis* (1543/5), WA, 42, 116.

37. Cf. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2003), pp. 177–92.

38. Martin Luther, WA, 5, 204; cf. Thomas Reinhuber, *Kämpfender Glaube, Studien zu Luthers Bekenntnis am Ende von De servo arbitrio* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000).

39. George Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 193, n. 3; but the sequel should read: 'which involves talking to the God hidden in Christ'. George's statement 'Luther's God is *Deus absconditus* as *Deus revelatus*' however, is very easy to mis-interpret.

40. Newlands, *God in Christian Perspective*, p. 194.

41. We could add Helmut Thielicke, *Theologie der Versuchung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949); Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952); Emile Cioran, *La Tentation d'exister* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1956).

42. 'This is the touchstone that teaches you not only to know and to understand but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how strong, how comforting God's word is; wisdom above all wisdom.' (Martin Luther, *WA*, 50: 661)