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The Noble Art of Self-Defence.

Schleiermacher and Von Clausewitz on Theological Polemics and the Theory of Warfare

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1. Introduction

Schleiermacher and Von Clausewitz present two appealing names in the title of this paper. The first is a theologian who is famous for his constructive work in theology, in building a university, and in unifying a church. The second is a general from the Napoleonic Wars, who has set out his views on warfare in a book that counts as the Bible of warfare. What do these names have in common, *bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble*? Though they do not have an inner resemblance, Schleiermacher and Von Clausewitz are brought together in this paper, for reasons of theological reflection, especially for the reflection upon the phenomenon of religious polemic.

The subject matter of 'religious polemics in context' forms a wide field of research. I want to contribute to this subject matter by examining a part of this wide range of religious polemics, by concentrating on the Christian religion, and, what is more, on Christian theology. We will not be concerned with polemic in religious experience and in the history and realisation of religious life, but we will direct our attention to the status of polemic in theological reflection. The question that reigns my examination is: What is the place of polemics in Christian theology? I narrow my scope by taking the entrance of systematic theology, and, within this field, the discipline of the encyclopaedia of theology. This scope offers the advantage of presenting a domain and a tradition in which the theological questions of polemics have been treated explicitly. My examination takes place within the range of a research project on the place and function of theological polemics. From the materials of this research project, I take up the work of Schleiermacher, especially his *Brief Outline On the Study of Theology*. From the questions that arise in reading this work, I will move to the theory of warfare of Clausewitz, and finally conclude with some statements on the position of polemics in theology.

2. Schleiermacher

In the year 1811, Schleiermacher presented a short booklet with the title *Kurze Darstellung des Theologischen Studiums zum Behuf einleitender Vorlesungen (Brief Outline On the Study of Theology)*. The work, based upon his lectures in Halle and Berlin on the encyclopaedia of theology, appeared in a rewritten edition in 1830.¹ In this book, Schleiermacher presents a conception of theology as a positive discipline of scholarship, whose constitution does not unfold from a single concept, but from a concrete objective, namely the organisation of the life of the community of the church (*Kirchenleitung*). All departments of the discipline of theology are directed towards this aim. In the first edition of the *Brief Outline*, Schleiermacher uses a vivid, organic image to express the unity of the parts of theology. He presents the whole of the theological disciplines as a tree, which consists of roots, a trunk, and a crown. The roots are the philosophical theology; the trunk is the historical theology (which consists of exegesis, church history, dogmatics and church sociology, for Schleiermacher), while the crown is formed by practical theology.²

What is the place of polemic in this tree of theology? We must realize that, from the Reformation era on, there has been a theological discipline of polemical theology, both in Protestant circles and in Roman Catholicism. From the seventeenth century on, the discipline of polemical theology had faded away, due to factors like the settling of the European religious wars, the rise of Pietism, and the cultural atmosphere of Enlightenment.³ Now one may be surprised to hear that the notion of polemical theology reappears again in Schleiermacher's presentation of theology. One could expect a place for polemic in practical theology. Polemic can have a theological contribution in shaping the practice of polemic in the church. However, Schleiermacher is anxious for using ecclesiastical polemic, for example as a rhetorical instrument in homiletics. Therefore, polemic is not mentioned in the branch of practical theology, though Schleiermacher intended to pay attention to polemic in practical theology, originally.⁴ Moreover, polemical theology does not appear in the trunk of theology,

¹ Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums* in: *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* I/6 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) [*KuDa*]; English translation: Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline On the Study of Theology*, transl. and introd. by Terrence N. Tice (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976).

² Schleiermacher has left out this image from the second edition. In this paper, I cannot dwell in great length upon the differences between the first and second edition of the *Brief Outline*. One should also compare Schleiermacher's courses on the encyclopaedia of theology, as laid down by the young student D.F. Strauß: Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Theologische Enzyklopädie. Nachschrift David Friedrich Strauß*, ed. by Walter Sachs (Schleiermacher-Archiv 4; Berlin/New York, 1987).

³ Cf. Martin Gierl, *Pietismus und Aufklärung. Theologische Polemik und die Kommunikationsreform der Wissenschaft am Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997).

⁴ *KuDa*², § 40.

in historical theology, where church history and dogmatics occupy a place. In Schleiermacher's time, the discipline of polemical theology tended to move to a historical and comparative approach. The notion of 'polemical theology' became even a term to label a certain phase in the development of ecumenics. It would be a natural consequence to place theological polemics as a part of historical theology, as a part of church history. Even if one should adhere to a traditional understanding of polemical theology, as a part of dogmatics, one should turn to what Schleiermacher calls historical theology, while dogmatics is a part of historical theology, in his conception.

Quite surprisingly, polemical theology is placed at the root of theology by Schleiermacher, shaped as one of the two constituents of philosophical theology. Philosophical theology, in Schleiermacher's conception, should ask how the given forms and expressions of churches relate to their original form of religious self-consciousness.⁵ This is a critical, comparative task, which philosophical theology can only perform from an external point of view.

This task of philosophical theology is expressed in two constituents, namely apologetics and polemics. It is the task of apologetics to investigate the identity of a tradition and its validity, and, subsequently defend its truth to outsiders. Apologetics defines the truth of a tradition by retracing the origin of a tradition in its inner conviction of a religious self-consciousness, and by relating this reason of existence to its development in history into the present tradition involved. Apologetics presents a historical positioning of truth, and this presentation is offered as a philosophical theological argument to outsiders. Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion* from 1799 is an eminent example of this apologetic task.⁶ The other constituent of philosophical theology, polemics, is directed towards an internal defence of the truth of a tradition. It is a philosophical theological task to render the truth and essence of a tradition, and to defend this determination to objections from outside. In this task of rendering, it also appears that there are elements within the tradition involved that do not correspond to this essence of religious self-consciousness. It is up to polemics to point out these elements, to define where divergences become defects and aberrations, and to expel these aberrations. Such a polemical theology is part of philosophical theology, because it

⁵ Cf. Michael Eckert, *Gott, Glauben und Wissen. Friedrich Schleiermachers Philosophische Theologie* (Schleiermacher-Archiv 3; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987); Martin Rössler, *Schleiermachers Programm der Philosophischen Theologie* (Schleiermacher-Archiv 14; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1994).

⁶ In a forthcoming monograph on theological polemics, I will elaborate on the question to what extent the *Speeches* present polemical aspects.

follows from the task of defining the essence and truth of a tradition. The same task leads to an external defence of a certain truth and to an internal act of purification.

I stop this exposition of the *Kurze Darstellung*, though I would be bursting to dwell upon the differences between the first and second edition of the work, its relation to Schleiermacher's colleges, his oeuvre, and the *Speeches*, especially. At this place, I only want to point out some observations to be seen in my exposition so far.

First, we may observe that Schleiermacher's use of the term polemics differs from the traditional dogmatic use. Polemics is a term for controversial theological argument. While apologetics enters a discussion with exponents of a culture, polemics is concerned with the vehement argument with adversaries, either from outside or from inside the church. Schleiermacher distributes the vehement argument over apologetics and polemics. Not the benevolent or vehement character of the argumentation is what counts, but its orientation to outsiders or insiders. Thus, apologetics can be mentioned as an intellectual act of defence as well.⁷ Moreover, polemical theology is usually related to dogmatics as a kind of applied dogmatics. Where the aim of dogmatic theology is to state the truths of Christian faith, the aim of polemical theology is to defend these truths over against the arguments of opponents. At first sight, following Schleiermacher's logic of theological structuring, one should place polemical theology in the department of historical theology, together with dogmatics, or somewhere in practical theology, as a reigning principle for the practice of religious and ecclesiastical dialogue. This, however, would not suit the task that Schleiermacher assigns to polemics. Its task is a critical one. It does not start from the mere developments of a tradition, but critically relates developments to their essence, their historical source in a conception of religious self-consciousness. This can only be accomplished from outside a historical movement, i.e., from the perspective of a philosophical theology that lies beneath the trunk of historical theology.

I want to point at a second theme, which results from the historical approach that we have seen at work. Philosophical theology does not take place within a theological void, but is an act that contributes to the aim of church organization. Consequently, any judgement of philosophical theology is not a mere observation, but is also a theological act that contributes to church organisation. Thus, the discernment of apologetics becomes an act of defending a religious truth to outsiders, and the discernment of polemics becomes an act of purification

⁷ *KuDa*¹, S. 14 §14/ *KuDa*² § 39.

and expelling. These facets of defence and purification are not separate acts of philosophical theology. An act of discernment in the perspective of church organisation becomes *ex officio* an act of defence and purification. If one should not be convinced of the inner relation between apologetics and polemics, it is at least the common aim of *Kirchenleitung* that brings them together.

This is, however, the point where a problem starts, because Schleiermacher is, just like his interpreters, a benevolent, liberal thinker, who does not want to go through life as a militant theologian (though we may enjoy his sharp tongue in actual literary and theological criticism). However, the consequences of his theological plan urge him to a positioning of polemics, with its militant connotations. Schleiermacher tries to carry this problem off, by distinguishing between general and special polemics. General polemics is the field of philosophical theology. It is not concerned with repelling explicit opinions and convictions, but is directed to fighting against the modes that threaten the tradition's turn to its source. Schleiermacher sees this danger embodied in two modes of thinking, namely indifference and separatism. There is also a task of suppressing certain propositions and heresies, but this is a task of special polemics, a task to be placed in practical theology.⁸ When Schleiermacher labels this special polemics with the pejorative name of a 'clerical exercise', he scarcely needs to add that a sound practical theology, in which this special polemics could obtain a place, should not view such a work as beneficial.⁹ Consequently, we need not to be surprised that this activity does not occur furthermore in the *Brief Outline*, or in Schleiermacher's oeuvre, elsewhere. Schleiermacher can only sigh that his conception of apologetics is hardly elaborated anywhere, and that the tradition of polemics altogether has ceased to be a living theological discipline, for a long time.¹⁰

Thus, we encounter in Schleiermacher a well-considered plan of theology, in which polemical theology takes a place as one of the two constituents of the root of theology, philosophical theology. We may observe that this modelling of polemical theology has not functioned, nor taken any effect. As I already mentioned, the cultural atmosphere of pietism and Enlightenment had changed the cultural scene for a long time. In his own time, Schleiermacher participated to bring into being a United Church of Lutherans and Calvinists,

⁸ *KuDa*², § 40.

⁹ *KuDa*², § 41.

¹⁰ *KUDa*², § 68.

heavily stimulated by government, not a religious sphere for active polemicizing either. Moreover, Schleiermacher's time gave way to a renewed Roman-Catholic revival, of which J.A. Möhler's *Symbolik* (1832) became the foundation. This work, and its reactions until Karl von Hase's *Handbuch der protestantischen Polemik*, set the ground for a new dogmatically oriented polemical discussion, in which Schleiermacher's conception of polemics soon was to be forgotten.

Besides these historical factors, there are also some systematic problems, inherent to Schleiermacher's conception of polemics. The first point that I mention consists in the collision of Schleiermacher's positioning of polemics with the reality of polemical theology. Schleiermacher's plan of philosophical theology remains an artificial construction, which is soon passed by reality. The construction of a general and special polemics is a creation that simply does not meet the harsh reality of dispute and controversy. A second tension is laid down in the inner logic of the polemical act. Does the philosophical theological act of discernment logically imply expelling and purification? Schleiermacher cannot deal with this question sufficiently. For him, polemics is a complement to apologetics, a negative pole in a dialectic tension. However, why should an a priori priority given to the pole of apologetics? There must be other grounds for founding the identity of theological polemic. We may doubt whether the act of polemicizing is comprehended fully with the move of Schleiermacher.

3. Clausewitz

At this point, I introduce the theory of warfare, as laid down by Carl von Clausewitz in his *Vom Kriege* (1832).¹¹ Schleiermacher and the Prussian general von Clausewitz have lived in Berlin in the same period. Because of their similar political and cultural interest, they may have known each other, though this is not important to our subject. The reason why I introduce Clausewitz' *On War* is because I need a model to explore the tensions that I have mentioned. The literature on Schleiermacher does not help us on these questions.¹² The questions are perhaps even obscured in theology, because of a predominant irenic intention

¹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Bonn: Dümmler, 1991¹⁹); Eng. transl.: Carl Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and transl. M. Howard, P. Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

¹² The subject matter of theological polemics is scarcely investigated in the Schleiermacher research. Some materials may be found in the following works, though the attention is more upon the category of the controversial in other works of Schleiermacher: Klaus-Martin Beckmann, *Der Begriff der Häresie bei Schleiermacher* (Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus Reihe 10, Band 16; Munich: Kaiser, 1959); Norbert Gutenberg, 'On the Category of the Controversial. An Approach Through Schleiermacher's Dialectic,' *Philosophy and Rhetorics* 27 (1994) 347-358; Eberhard Jüngel, 'Häresis – ein Wort das wieder zu Ehren gebraucht werden sollte,' *ZThK* 96 (1999) 207-234; Hermann Timm, *Die heilige Revolution. Das religiöse Totalitätskonzept der Frühromantik. Schleiermacher – Novalis – Friedrich Schlegel* (Frankfurt a.M.: Syndikat, 1978).

in theology. With *On war*, I offer a model for exploring the act of polemicizing, apart from any theological content. How could such a model better be derived than from the theory of warfare? I leave for this moment all the fascinating details of his life and works and I concentrate upon the single work *On War*.¹³ From this work, I take two facets, which have a model-value in elucidating the problems that we have encountered in Schleiermacher.

As a first facet, I take Clausewitz' dealing with the reality of warfare. Clausewitz has become famous for his definition of war as the continuance of political activity with other means.¹⁴ One could easily misunderstand this statement as a prescriptive proposition: war may be waged, when it is performed in continuance with a political aim. However, it is the surprising approach of Clausewitz' theory that this statement exactly says what it says: whenever war is waged, it continues the tensions and collisions of political manoeuvres and activities with other means. One may acknowledge that it is a sound rule to fit warfare in with a political perspective; but this is not what Clausewitz aims at. He wants to present a theory that grasps the phenomenon of warfare.¹⁵ It is his conviction that such a theory should describe the whole of warfare as a fact of its own. Warfare cannot be reduced to politics; it has, in fact, other means, which ask for a different approach. On the other hand, one cannot view warfare as a separate field either, though many generals and military theorists through the centuries have held any political influence in contempt. The phenomenon of warfare is a continuation of political activity with other means; and its factual appearance can be approached only from this view.

I must admit that it is very refreshing to read the is-sentences of *On War* as descriptive is-sentences, and not as antiquated prescriptions how to wage war. Thanks to interpreters like Raymond Aron, this descriptive, phenomenological approach opens new perspectives for me.¹⁶ Though war is to be condemned, it is a simple reality that there are wars. A theory of warfare cannot capture that phenomenon. Any belief in such force of theory is foreign to Clausewitz. Still, war does not escape fully from any theoretic approach. War is the continuance of political activity with other means. The word continuance enables the theorist the possibility for reflection. At the same time, it creates a temporal facet to any theory. There

¹³ Cf. for biographical details the excellent work of Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, bk. I,1,24; cf. bk. VIII,6B.

¹⁵ This is recognized by authors like Raymond Aron, *Sur Clausewitz* (Historiques ; Bruxelles : Éditions Complexe, 1987) ; A.J. Leijen, *Over grenzen* (Breda : KMA, 1987) ; Alexis Philonenko, 'Clausewitz ou l'oeuvre inachevée: l'esprit de la guerre', *Revue de Morale et de Métaphysique* 95 (1990) 471-512.

¹⁶ Raymond Aron, *Penser la guerre. Clausewitz I-II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

is a situation beyond political arbitration; there is a reality in which all forces are directed towards total annihilation. Still, this reality does not escape from our reflection.

I adopt this model of thinking controversy to theology. There is a reality of religious conflict, though we may condemn its occurrence. Theological theory cannot grasp this phenomenon, though it would like to do so. However, religious controversy does not escape from any theory. There is more than historical explanation, just like Clausewitz' theory of war is more than his accounts of historical battles. Clausewitz needs these historical analyses, and he contributes to the field by studies of battles in antiquity and accounts of his own participation in the Napoleonic Wars. However, his theory reaches beyond the historical materials and offers a possibility of reflecting a general phenomenon. Likewise, it could be a challenge to systematic theology not to leave religious controversy to the historians, but to take up reflection. There is scarcely any material upon the question in how much we can view religious polemics as a continuance of dialogical activity with other means. For me, the challenge of Clausewitz is laid down in the historical approach, just as I have met in Schleiermacher. Theological reflection on religious polemics is more than linguistic pragmatics, just as it is more than historical analysis. The model of Clausewitz lays open this theoretical lacuna. This is achieved, because the normative element of Christian irenics is set-aside for a moment, by concentrating upon the element of controversy.

I only touch on a second facet from the model of *On War*. Schleiermacher has presented apologetics and polemics as dialectic poles, as complements. However, because of his preference for apologetics, polemics is never elaborated as a real complement. At this point I would like to bring Clausewitz' dialectic of attack and defence. I do not suggest that apologetics and polemics are equal to attack and defence, but I only mention the way in which attack and defence become dialectical complements for Clausewitz. It is one of his delightfully clear observations, that a war only starts at the moment of defence. What is an invasion or violation becomes war at the moment of resistance. Thus, for the meaning of war, defence is prior to attack.¹⁷ It would be interesting to elaborate this relation to Schleiermacher. In what respect does apologetics need polemics, not as a matter of functioning, but in view of its theoretical meaning? That would exactly be a question that fits the encyclopaedic scope of the *Brief Outline*. Similarly, the elaboration of the dialectic attack-defence on the level of strategy and of tactics could offer a model for better relating general and special polemics.

¹⁷ Consequently, the book devoted to defence precedes the book on attack in *On War*. Cf. bk. VI and VII, and ch. VI,7, especially.

4. Conclusion

With Schleiermacher's *Brief Outline*, I have presented a vivid and fascinating conception of theology. By viewing theology as a positive science, the possibility is brought into the open to situate the occurrence of polemics into the very roots of theology. However, Schleiermacher's disdain for actual polemicizing has created some tensions in his exposition. By introducing Clausewitz, *On War*, I intend to offer a model for thinking that enables us to implement the factual occurrence of religious controversy deeper into the fundamentals of theology. This is a hazardous task, because the reception of both Schleiermacher and Clausewitz learn us how, exactly at the point of controversy and conflict, description and prescription become intermingled. Any thinking with models should be supplemented with attention to facets like the fascination of power, the influence of escalation, and the violence of theological language itself. Still, I believe that there is a clear theological benefit in first implementing the formal aspects of the model that I have described, before putting in these complications.

In the eighteenth century, a new sport was devised, adorned with the distinguished name of 'pugilism'. A set of rules was soon created in order to make of this sport the outstanding example of the 'noble art of self-defence'. Soon after its creation, these rules have not prevented this sport of becoming the rather rough and popular activity that is known with the common name of boxing. There is no noble art of self-defence, and every endeavour to devise one, is soon contaminated with other intentions. Likewise, if there is any form of theological polemics, it is not in order to create noble rules for self-defence, which only show to be deceptive; but it is exactly devised in order to show the factual deceitfulness of such mechanisms.

It is in vain to try to govern the reality of conflict in an encompassing theory. Clausewitz was aware of this vanity, but he used his theory of warfare as a means to try to approach the phenomenon of violence as close as possible. We meet a similar attempt in Schleiermacher, who was tried to remain close to actual religious experience and representations. His formal dealing with polemic, however, cannot escape from some weaknesses. It is a theoretical decision to bring Schleiermacher and Clausewitz together. I have done this theoretical act as a means to show their mutual theoretical possibilities and weak points. Their grand efforts in theory at least make clear for us, that a systematic dealing with the reality of polemic in religion remains a fundamental theological task, which has been neglected too long for times.