

Walter Kasper and his theological programme

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Walter Kasper's name is by now well-known among English-speaking readers of theology: the 1984 translation of *Der Gott Jesu Christi* following on the translating in 1976 of *Jesus der Christus* established his reputation as a writer at once conceptually rigorous and historically well-informed.¹ What is less understood, however, is the *total context* to which these works belong. From Kasper's background in the Tübingen School his writings so far can be shown to represent a total theological programme of a quite distinctive kind. This programme is not only of considerable intrinsic interest. It also has a wider church-political significance in the light of Kasper's selection as the official theologian of the Roman Synod Secretariat, entrusted with the collation and theological analysis of the 'submissions' made to the Holy See by national conferences of bishops in readiness for the 1985 Synod on 'The Church after Vatican II'. His appointment offers a useful key to the debate about the intentions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (and more generally, of the Roman Curia in its higher echelons) in the middle 1980's. In particular, it helps to determine whether these intentions are best described as 'Neo-Ultramontane', as argued (in effect) by a group of writers in *New Blackfriars* in June 1985, or rather, as the present author has maintained, as offering a *via media* or *re-accentramento* ('re-centring') for Church and theology, amid the competing voices of left and right-wing radicalism in post-conciliar Catholicism.² This is a debate which has not ended with the ending of the Synod.

Kasper and the Tübingen School

Kasper was born in 1933 in Heidenheim, a town of the Swabian forest, not far from Tübingen. He began his theological studies at Tübingen in 1952, and has been there, minus a short period in Munich, ever since. Kasper is, in fact, a pure product of the Catholic Tübingen school, and since his theological programme is a re-statement of the historic aims of that school, I will begin by sketching in this essential background.

The origins of the Tübingen school were somewhat fortuitous.³ In the territorial re-structuring of Germany which followed on the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, a large part of Catholic Swabia was

handed over to the Elector of Württemberg, a Protestant. This prince, anxious to demonstrate his liberality to his newly-acquired Catholic subjects, founded a school of Catholic theology which eventually settled at Tübingen, a pleasing university and market town on the river Neckar.⁴ From its inception the Tübingen school was characterised by two features.⁵ Firstly, it was marked by devotion to the Catholic tradition in a wide sense: to the liturgy, the fathers and the thought and literature of the Church down the centuries. Secondly, it was remarkably open to the stimulating, if at times slightly oddball, philosophical culture of early nineteenth century Germany, the various strains of Romantic and Idealist thinking associated with such names as Schiller, Schleiermacher, Schelling and Hegel.⁶ Furthermore, as biblical criticism was entering into its first phase of maturity in (mainly) Protestant circles at about this time, the Catholic Tübingen school also tried to integrate this element, along with the commitment to Catholic tradition and contemporary philosophy.

The two principal concerns of the school were fundamental theology and ecclesiology. In *fundamental theology*—and here the principal names are Johann Sebastian von Drey (1777—1853) and Franz Anton Staudenmaier (1800—1856)—it confronted head-on the critique of revealed religion found in the German Enlightenment, and especially in Lessing and Kant.⁷ Drey and Staudenmaier argued that reason finds its absolute foundation not in its own intellectual quality but in its acceptance of a revelation mediated in a history which is itself a transcendent fulfilment of nature. Their position may be thought of as an attempt to negotiate a channel between Idealism on the one hand, and a pure supernaturalism on the other.⁸ The inherent difficulty of such an undertaking was shown up in the course of the dispute between Church authority and two contemporary German-speaking theologians, Georg Hermes and Anton Günther, which centred on the nature of the relationship between faith and rationality. The Roman Church increasingly found historic Scholasticism to be a safer, because tried-and-tested, philosophical underpinning for a revealed religion. But this tendency, which was to reach its acme with the draconic imposition of the 'doctrine of St Thomas' on Catholic faculties of philosophy and theology by Pius X and Benedict XV was never 'received' at Tübingen.⁹

In *ecclesiology*, the most characteristic idea of the Tübingen men was that of the Church as a supernatural organism: an organic society whose basis was the supernatural life given it by Christ. Since Christianity is (thus) a divine reality, it necessarily transcends any particular statement of its own content. But as time goes on, and the Church 'develops', we can glimpse different aspects of this transcendent revelation which the various historical phases of its carrier-organism show us. These notions of Johann Adam Möhler (1796—1838) have an

affinity to the ideas of Newman, though the two men were working quite independently of each other.¹⁰ Just as the more philosophical side of Tübingen theology aroused anxiety in less adventurous Catholic circles, so the ideas of 'Möhler (and Newman) on the Church and doctrinal development were later suspected of a too hasty surrender to the historicist spirit of the age. Be that as it may, the nineteenth century Tübingen doctors bequeathed to their twentieth century successors two precious possessions: firstly, a wholehearted commitment to the Catholic tradition in its historical fulness and integrity, and, secondly, a generous yet critically alert philosophical and cultural openness.¹¹ One has only to consider the contrasting but complementary qualities of such conciliar documents as *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* to see that the Second Vatican Council was above all a Council ultimately inspired by Tübingen theology, and that it is not the Rhine but the Neckar which 'flows into the Tiber'. In Kasper's case, the two-fold Tübingen concern for tradition and philosophical originality is neatly conveyed in his first two big books. Their subjects were the concept of tradition in the surprisingly creative Roman school of the nineteenth century, and an exploration of what the non-Catholic philosopher F.W.J. von Schelling (1775—1854) has to offer a contemporary conceptualisation of God as 'the Absolute in history'.

Tradition and philosophy in Kasper

Kasper's *Die Lehre von der Tradition in der Römischen Schule* was his doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of another great Tübingen man, Josef Rupert Geiselmann.¹² It is intriguing to note that the foreword extends an additional word of thanks to Leo Scheffczyk and Hans Küng: for the former is now one of the most acerbic critics of the latter, seen as an apostate from the Tübingen tradition for his practical exaltation of historical-critical method as the supreme norm of ecclesial faith.¹³ The principal contention of Kasper's study is that, by refusing to reduce the concept of the Church's *tradition* to that of her *magisterium*, Roman theologians like Giovanni Perrone, Carlo Passaglia, Clemens Schraader and Johann Baptist Franzelin can be seen as carrying out the very same task in Rome as the Tübingen school achieved in Württemberg.¹⁴ A major work of historical scholarship, the book also carries a message for the wider Church. Though geographically Cisalpine and thoroughly homegrown, the ecclesiology of German Catholicism bears a marked family-resemblance to that of the main theological architects of the *First* Vatican Council. The implication is that the Council, and in particular its account of the Roman primacy, must have suffered distortion by being looked at through Neo-Ultramontane spectacles. Writing in 1962, just as the *Second* Vatican Council opened, Kasper expresses the classical Tübingen commitment to tradition as the

chief, and perennially fruitful, principle of authority for Christian theology. While not downplaying the role of the magisterium, he situates it where it belongs: in the making of partial, but abidingly valuable, determinations of the content of tradition. The *leit-motif* is already announced on the first page, in an appreciative citation from Perrone's *Il Protestantismo e la regola di fede*: 'To transcend tradition is assuredly nothing other than to destroy Christianity itself'.¹⁵

In 1965 Kasper took the opportunity to put into words the other aspect of the Tübingen inheritance: openness to philosophical culture in the search for a conceptuality for the faith expressed in tradition.¹⁶ Kasper's extended essay on Schelling, *Das Absolute in der Geschichte*, deals with an author little studied in the United Kingdom, and scarcely more so in the English-speaking world outside the British Isles.¹⁷ To understand Kasper's aims in this second book it may be helpful to situate it within the somewhat bewildering complexity of Schelling studies in Continental Europe. Following Père Xavier de Tilliette's monumental survey of Schelling scholarship, the German philosopher has been presented in three ways, corresponding to three historical periods.¹⁸ From his death until the end of the nineteenth century, he pursued an honorary existence as a fill-in between Fichte and Hegel. With Edward von Hartmann's *Schellings philosophisches System*, written in 1897, he began to be studied for his own sake, but with the accent on his 'polyvalence': his ambiguities and shifts of direction. Then, in 1927, with Adolf Allwohn's *Der Mythos bei Schelling*, the idea began to be mooted that Schelling's development was coherent, that his 'last' or 'positive' philosophy was a major contribution to the philosophy of religion, and that he had something of contemporary importance to offer to an account of man-in-the-world who is also man-before-God. The idea that Schelling might enable theologians to address their non-believing contemporaries had been anticipated by Paul Tillich, who wrote a dissertation on him at Breslau in 1910.¹⁹ Even more striking, however, is the fact that Jürgen Habermas, by the 1960's a major figure in German Neo-Marxism, had devoted *his* dissertation to Schelling under a title which must surely have provided Kasper's model: *Das Absolute und die Geschichte*.²⁰

Schelling's thought had already been drawn on theologically by the nineteenth-century Tübingen School, and especially by Staudenmaier. Kasper evidently believed, as a result of the slice of intellectual history I have briefly summarised above, that he might usefully resume and take further Staudenmaier's project. In real terms, what did this mean? The key to the unity of Schelling's development, to his philosophical originality *and* his contemporary relevance, lies in his concept of *die Freiheit*, 'freedom'. Over against his own Fichtean beginnings, now seen as a 'system of necessity', Schelling affirms with increasing clarity the

primacy of the unforeseeably free, and of the real as knowable only *a posteriori*: in the last analysis, this involves a notion of God as sovereignly free and creative, a notion which has in fact emerged from the event of Christianity.²¹ Schelling thus critically limits Idealism by showing that reason does not have power over itself, but is always anticipated by the God of positive philosophy who is its own incomprehensible origin.²² As Tilliette puts it, '*L'Absolu de la raison est l'Absolu de la raison*'.²³ Thus Kasper found himself able to argue that he was not departing from strict philosophical rationality in posing the question, how does the Absolute come out of itself (in the free act of creating)? How do we (as *finite* spirits) come forth from the Absolute and (as *free* spirits) posit ourselves as other than and opposed to God?²⁴ Kasper finds the illumination he needs to answer these questions in the Church's faith in God as Trinity. And he locates the means to overcome the schism between God's infinite freedom and our finite freedom (with all its baleful consequences in the experiences of sin, guilt and meaninglessness) in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Kasper's prescription for theology

The working out of these themes was to produce in time Kasper's two master-works, *Der Gott Jesu Christi* and *Jesus der Christus*. These treatises contain frequent brief statements of his Tübingen inheritance, but the fullest expression of his theological programme is found in *Die Methoden der Dogmatik*, of which an English translation appeared in Ireland in 1967.²⁵ Here we find just what by now we should expect: a twin stress on, firstly, *tradition*, for the spirit 'comes into its own only by encountering tradition', and, secondly, *concern with philosophical intelligibility in a given historical moment*, which in our case is a moment when faith is in crisis, doubting the possibility of saying anything coherent about God.²⁶ As Kasper will later write:

A renewal of both tradition and speculation is needed, precisely in the present much-deplored stagnation of theology.²⁷

Only two years after the Council had closed, Kasper lamented the fact that a justifiable criticism of the a-worldliness of theology in the past (*not*, of course, that of the Tübingen school!) now threatens to drive us to the other extreme, giving rise to a secular theology that is at variance with tradition.²⁸ Fifteen years later, writing in the pontificate of John Paul II, Kasper sees no reason to modify these judgments:

In view of the many reductionist theological programs now in existence it is unfortunately not a redundancy to say that, especially today, a theological theology is the need of the hour and the only appropriate answer to modern atheism.²⁹

Kasper argues that the preservation of the transcendence of God, over
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against all attempts, however well-intentioned, to transform him into a means to inner-worldly ends, is *also* the preservation of the transcendence of the human person, and so of the 'freedom and inalienable rights of humanity'.³⁰

It is undoubtedly pleonastic to speak ... of theological theology as a program; the formula 'theological theology' makes sense only as a polemical formula which serves to remind theology of its own proper theme ... (Theology's contribution) must take the form of the confession of the Trinity. Precisely because this confession takes seriously the Godness of God, his freedom in love, it is able to rescue the freedom in love and for love that has been given us by God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, and thus to rescue the humanity of man at a time when it is most threatened.³¹

Thus a return to the theocentrism of 'the church fathers and the other great doctors of the Church' (and Kasper's dogmatic writings are deeply and minutely informed by both) is no flight from contemporary theological creativity and liberty of spirit but, on the contrary, its necessary presupposition.

Kasper's criticism of much post-conciliar theology is paradoxically animated, therefore, by a Schellengian commitment to *freedom*. This freedom is not, however, the 'negative' freedom of unlimited self-determination but, in Sir Isaiah Berlin's phrase, the 'positive' freedom which consists in the efficacious possibility of being determined by the truth—a truth which is also the good for man.³²

A Question

But how does Kasper know that his own account of the liberating truth of the God of Jesus Christ is itself satisfactory in ways that others apparently are not? In point of fact, a certain partiality enters into Kasper's theological judgment just because of his acute sensitivity to the tragedy of the West: the elimination of the mystery of man *via* the elimination of the mystery of God. Yet the intellectual and spiritual problem of atheism is not so central, we are led to believe, for the churches of the Third World as it is for those of the First and Second. The universally valid elements in his programme are, one may suggest, twofold: firstly, its Trinitarian and christological theocentrism, and, secondly, its insistence that in choosing a philosophy as *ancilla fidei* one must choose one that:

in opposition to every narrowing and obscuring of the human horizon keeps open the question about the meaning of the whole, and precisely in this way serves the humanness of humanity.³³

The Tübingen project of combining traditionalism with openness to the

times is *instantiated* in Kasper's work but it is not *exhaustively realised* there. In the universe of theological discourse, as in the Church as a whole, *positive* freedom, which in the last analysis is inseparable from the divine gift of creation and grace, must be held together with *negative* freedom, which is the human task of incarnating creation and grace in a myriad cultural forms.

The principles involved have been beautifully stated by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in a conference—as yet, I believe, unpublished—given at the Centre d'Etudes Saint-Louis de France in Rome. In an exposition of positive freedom, Ratzinger remarks:

In the Church, the debate (about freedom) concerns liberty in its deepest sense, as openness to the divine Being in order to become a sharer in Its life. ... The fundamental right of Christians is the right to the whole faith ... All other liberties in the Church are ordered to this foundational right.

And he continues in an equally striking allusion to negative freedom:

Under this common denominator of faith we must leave a wide space for differing projects and forms of spiritual life, and, analogously, to differing forms of thought, so that each with its own richness may contribute to the faith of the Church.... What is in question is, on the one hand, the basic right of the faithful to a faith which is pure, and, on the other, the right to express this faith in the thought and language of their own time.³⁴

From these measured words, which would have gladdened the hearts of the Tübingen doctors, it is hard to excogitate a nightmare of papalist *revanchisme*. The pastoral magisterium must ensure that its practice is as excellent as its theory. The rest of the Church has the right and duty to expect of the Roman see, to which so much responsibility has been entrusted, the same sobriety of tone and equity of judgment in all its actions.

1 *Jesus der Christus* (Mainz 1974), E.T. *Jesus the Christ* (London 1976); *Der Gott Jesu Christi* (Mainz 1982), E.T. *The God of Jesus Christ* (London 1984).

2 Ratzinger on the Faith: a Response — *New Blackfriars* LXVI. 780 (June, 1985), *passim*. For an alternative view, see A. Nichols OP, 'The Pope and his Critics', *The Tablet*, 9.3.1985, p. 244, and 'In support of Cardinal Ratzinger', *ib.* 20.7.1985, p. 749.

3 See E. Stolz et al., 'Beiträge zur Geschichte der Universität, besonders der katholisch-theologischen Fakultät in Tübingen', *Theologische Quartalschrift* 108 (1927), pp. 1—220.

4 In 1817, see *ib.* pp. 77—133.

5 J.R. Geiselman, *Die katholische Tübingen Schule: ihre theologische Eigenart* (Freiburg 1964); c.f. *Jesus Christ* op. cit. p. 9:

In contradistinction to many contemporary works on Jesus, they (the Tübingen theologians) had no doubt that that origin (the origin of Christianity in Jesus Christ) which is still normative for us, was accessible only through biblical and ecclesiastical tradition. They knew that we could dispense with that tradition only at the cost of a

- severe impoverishment of our resources. They differed from the neo-scholastic theology of their time in their parallel conviction that tradition had to be handed on as something living; that is, in conjunction and confrontation with the comments and questions of a particular time.
- 6 P. Hünermann, 'Der Reflex des deutschen Idealismus in der Theologie der katholischen Tübinger Schule', *Philosophisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft* 72 (1964—5), pp. 161—179.
- 7 L. Lohmann, *Die Philosophie der Offenbarung bei J.S. von Drey* (Freiburg 1953); P. Weindel, *Das Verhältnis von Glauben und Wissen in der Theologie F.A. Staudenmaiers* (Dusseldorf 1940).
- 8 E. Klinger, 'Tübingen School', *Sacramentum Mundi* VI, pp. 318—320.
- 9 For Kasper's own critique of Neo-Scholasticism, see *The Methods of Dogmatic Theology* (Shannon 1969) chapter 2.
- 10 J.R. Geiselmann, *Lebendiger Glaube aus geheiligter Überlieferung. J.A. Möhler und die katholische Tübinger Schule* (Mainz 1972); H. Tristram, 'J.A. Moehler et J.H. Newman', *Revue des Sciences philosophiques et theologiques XXVII* (1938), pp. 184—204.
- 11 The Tübingen School did not suffer from *uncritical* openness: thus Staudenmaier attacked Hegel, Möhler disputed with L. Bautain and F.C. Baur, while J.E. Kuhn criticised D.F. Strauss.
- 12 *Die Lehre von der Tradition in der Römischen Schule* (Freiburg 1962).
- 13 See e.g. L. Scheffczyk, *Kursänderung des Glaubens? Theologische Gründe zur Entscheidung im Fall Küng* (Stein am Rhein 1980); Küng's critics seem borne out on this point by C.M. LaCugna's exhaustive investigation in her *The Theological Methodology of Hans Küng* (Chico 1982).
- 14 *Die Lehre von der Tradition in der Römischen Schule* op. cit. pp. 420—422; cf. J.R. Geiselmann's foreword: 'In Franzelin ist aber zugleich Möhler auf diesem Konzil (i.e. Vatican I) anwesend', ib. p. viii.
- 15 G. Perrone, *Il Protestantismo e la regola di fede* (Rome 1853), II. c. 1, a. 2, p. 41.
- 16 *Das Absolute in der Geschichte. Philosophie und Theologie der Geschichte in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Mainz 1965).
- 17 But see R. Gray-Smith, *God in the Philosophy of Schelling* (London 1933). The most painless way for an English reader to approach Schelling is, perhaps, by way of Coleridge: see e.g. A.C. Dunstan, 'The German influence on Coleridge', *Modern Language Review* 18 (1923), pp. 183—200.
- 18 X. de Tilliette, *Schelling. Une Philosophie en devenir* (Paris 1970), I. pp. 24—27.
- 19 J.W. Rathburn and F. Burwick, 'Paul Tillich and the philosophy of Schelling', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1964), pp. 373—393.
- 20 J. Habermas, *Das Absolute und die Geschichte: von der Zweispältigkeit in Schellings Denken* (Bonn 1954).
- 21 This interpretation of Schelling was first clearly stated by H. Fuhrmans in *Schellings letzte Philosophie. Die negative und positive Philosophie im Einsatz des Spätidealismus* (Bonn 1940).
- 22 C.f. W. Schutz, *Die Vollendung des Deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Stuttgart 1955), pp. 86—87; 300—307.
- 23 X. de Tilliette, *Schelling*, op. cit. I. p. 50.
- 24 *Das Absolute in der Geschichte* op. cit.
- 25 *Die Methoden der Dogmatik. Einheit und Vielheit* (Munich 1967) (ET *The Methods of Dogmatic Theology*).
- 26 Ib. pp. 43; 2.
- 27 *The God of Jesus Christ* op. cit. p. ix.
- 28 *The Methods of Dogmatic Theology* op. cit. pp. 3—4.
- 29 *The God of Jesus Christ* op. cit. p. 15.
- 30 Ib.
- 31 Ib. p. 316.
- 32 I. Berlin, *The Concepts of Liberty* (Oxford 1958).
- 33 *The God of Jesus Christ* op. cit. p. 15.

- 34 J. Ratzinger, 'Loi de l'Eglise et liberté du chrétien', *Service culturel de l'Ambassade de France près la Saint-Siège*, 24.11.1983. Ratzinger's account is indebted for its exegetical and theological foundations to D. Nestle, *Eleutheria. Studien zum Wesen der Freiheit bei den Griechen und im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen 1967), and to E. Coreth, 'Zur Problemgeschichte menschlicher Freiheit', *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 94 (1972), pp. 258—289.

What is the weather like in Ethiopia?

Ian Richard Netton

In England
everything is white.
It seems that it has always been so:
as if the trees have worn
their garb of snow
from the first dawn of the Arctic light
to their smug self-possession now.

Everything is quiet.
A silence which has been exiled a long time
has returned
and gloating
over a forgotten crime
has disguised each bush and tree
more effectively
than the snow itself.

Do the snow and silence
make all things equal
like the primeval ice
which ruled before man
when, briefly,
the bushes wore ermine,
then froze and died?

The Ethiopian has sunshine,
bone-absorbed,
and the Westerner
can afford
a shiver.