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The Theology of Relationships: The Systematic Theological Examination of the Vertical God-Man Relationship and the Man-to-Man Relationship Leading from it in a Horizontal Direction.

Habilitation Thesis
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Abstract

I divided my dissertation, which presents my academic work into four main parts for the sake of clarity. According to established practice, the *first three* sections relate to three main areas in the evaluation of academic work: research, education, and service for university and society. The *fourth* part concerns the professional development plan for the future. This part is naturally shorter than the previous ones, as this dissertation should primarily present the results that have already been achieved.

(I.) I also divided the first chapter presenting my research activity into 4 further subsections: (1) research work carried out within publications; (2-3.) participation in international and domestic scientific conferences; (4.) research projects. At the very beginning of the paper, I make brief reference to the higher education institutions that defined the start of my work in the field of Theology: the Protestant Theological Institute in Cluj-Napoca and its German-speaking branch in Sibiu, as well as the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy at the University of Basel. I begin the presentation of my research work in publications by presenting my research on the theology of S. A. Kierkegaard. My doctoral dissertation was only a part of this work, as I have published writings on the theology of Kierkegaard in parallel with my dissertation and afterwards as well. The most important aspect concerning the central topic of my dissertation is that the Kierkegaard-research was decisive in shaping the main direction of my postdoctoral work as well.

In my postdoctoral research, I have examined a number of fundamental issues of Dogmatics and Ethics, and in my dissertation I highlighted those that fit into the theological research path described in the title, i.e. the vertical relationship of God and man and the man-to-man relationship that leads in horizontal direction from the previous one. I have thought of the basic idea of this field at the very beginning of my Kierkegaard research, when I came across the great definition that man can only become his true self in relation to God: “A human being is spirit. [...] A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a

relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.”¹The Danish thinker also explains how man becomes his true self, as he devotes an entire book to the idea which he builds on the apostle Paul’s following phrase: “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14,23). Sin is the distortion of the God-man relationship, the “despair”, which is the “sickness” leading to death, i.e., the death of the spirit. Following this logic, the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith. Unfortunately, the continuity of this faith is stuttered in human life, “But eternity is the essential continuity and demands this of a person or that he be conscious as spirit and have faith.”²

The relationship with God, the nature of the faith that connects man to God, shows great differences in different religions and there are different peculiarities in the “formula of faith” according to denominational affiliation as well. Even within the same denomination, we can experience shifts of emphasis in different church history periods. According to the Reformed interpretation, faith extends to all three functions of human consciousness: intellect, emotion, and will, and as such, we speak of the cognitive, affective, and volitional aspects of faith. The experience and confession of faith belongs to the latter. We can speak of healthy spirituality, when the three aspects of faith are in balance. In my dissertation I also deal with the relationship between faith and good deeds, the process of the realization of faith, the creed documents carrying the cognitive aspects of faith and the possibilities and limitations of their transmission and teachability.

In Protestant Theological Anthropology, we encounter the interpretation of humans being created in the image of God, i.e., the *Imago Dei*, as a concept of relation. In this sense, *Imago Dei* means responsibility towards the created world, in the way that God handles the world. Although the *Imago Dei* was fractured after the fall of man, one of the criteria of a faith-filled existence is that man still strives for responsible actions towards the created world and his fellow human beings. As such, the often-mentioned concept of Calvinian predestination is also worth a clearing from the speculative misconceptions that have been attached to it over the centuries, to see that it is not identical to the image of the inevitable, predetermined sad destiny of Greek tragedies, and it does also not degrade man into a light-hearted puppet figure, but it activates him. Experiencing God’s offer of salvation will give man gratitude and cause man to relate to the world correctly, to seek out, and to do the tasks God has given to him. If someone fails to do so, or gets lost along the way, the church seeks

¹KIERKEGAARD, Søren Aabye: *The Sickness unto Death*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. (*Sygdomen til Doden*, by Anti-Climacus, ed.S. Kierkegaard, 1849), 13.

²KIERKEGAARD, S.: *The Sickness unto Death*. 105.

to steer him in the right direction, to lead him back to a community of love that connects one to God and to one another by exercising the power of the keys, that is, through preaching and disciplining.

Man, who approaches God with faith, builds on his horizontal network at communal level, within the church, God being the guarantor of these networks in each case (as He is the one who creates *Koinonia* among people). One of the reforming legacies of Protestant churches is the principle that urges one to do constant soul-searching and, if need be, to constantly be renewed based on the verse: “Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda Debet Secundum Verbum Dei”. Along my research, I have dealt with the critical examination of the church and the critical analysis of certain practices on several occasions.

Normative solutions to the ethical problems of the man-to-man relationship could easily be deduced from the correct answer to the issue of the God-man relationship. However, the individual matters should not be shorted, but should be examined in detail, so I have tried to balance the common ethical standards of the various religions and to draw attention to the issue of responsibility. In the Bible, the “locus classicus” of indifferent human behaviour in relation to each other is the story of Cain and Abel, in which a brother turns his back on his brother. In the history of Theology, the description of this phenomenon is illustrated by the concept of *estrangement*. One of the most detailed reflections on this concept in the 20th century is found in Paul Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, who states that: “The state of existence is the state of estrangement. Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself. The transition from essence to existence results in personal guilt and universal tragedy.”³ However, man must not resign in this state, as one of the hallmarks of faithful existence is precisely man’s ability to overcome indifference by the power of the Spirit of God and to deal responsibly with the other person.

I have addressed the issue of responsible attitudes in several studies, for example, I have dealt more thoroughly with the issues of choosing a partner, having children, and cultural community among the family ethics issues of the 5th Commandment. In his book *Christ and Culture*⁴, one of the most significant works of social ethics of the 20th century, Richard Niebuhr seeks to objectively analyse the relationship between Christianity and culture and to draw sound conclusions according to which the church should not withdraw from society, but it should only carry out its culture-shaping work along its own authentic

³TILLICH, Paul (1957): *Systematic Theology Vol. 2*. University of Chicago Press, 1975, 44–45.

⁴NIEBUHR, Richard: *Christ and Culture*, 259 pp. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1951.

goals. In my own study regarding this topic, I have attempted to explore the position of 20th century Hungarian Reformed theologians on this matter.

Among the ethical issues I have rethought, which vividly affect man-to-man relationships, several of my studies deal with the 9th Commandment, i.e., with *the ethics of speech*. In addition to the classical topics of the issue, we also come across new technical terms such as the concept of “mobbing”, which, although not lexically, but was known in terms of content in biblical times. In my research, I also point out the importance of dialogue. The inability to carry out a dialogue is unfortunately an unwanted feature of many endangered areas. Remedying the problem must start at its roots. Dialogue can be learned, and as such, it should be part of the compulsory curriculum for children, as it has been working as of the time of Levinas in the luckier areas of Europe, where we can talk about democratic societies. The question to be dealt with is the exact nature of dialogue and its preconditions. Christian Theology can also build on the definitions of Habermas and Kreiner. The preconditions include good self-knowledge and the knowledge of the other person’s personality, life path, and cultural background. Philosophical analyses (K. Popper, Gadamer) point out that it takes courage to start a dialogue, as it means self-disclosure and an assumption that either side will be right. However, effective dialogue is not only a risk, because when one’s own truth is eroded, the two interlocutors are enriched by each other’s truths and become more than they were before. In my dissertation, I also elaborate on my studies, which deal with the verbal factors of building and nurturing the man-to-man relationship and point to the Christian roots of the art of communication.

There are also missiological aspects to the life of a person who has come into contact with God, for at the moment of becoming aware of one’s relationship with God, man must recognize what his mission is in the world. On the question of vocation-mission-service, Protestant Theology also distinguishes between specifically ecclesiastical work and man’s roles in the world and speaks separately of official ecclesiastical ministry and the social role of the individual. I have dealt with both of these areas. In my own research, I have examined these matters primarily in relation to women, since, as a woman theologian, I was personally interested in finding appropriate answers concerning pastors’ wives, womenpastors and religion teachers. Throughout various life paths, I have presented the Protestant tradition according to which man cannot be indifferent to social issues, but shall proclaim the glory of God in the world by responsibly dealing with the community in social, economic, and cultural matters alike.

In Chapters 2-3 of the first part of my dissertation, I described the fifty or so international and domestic scientific conferences I attended with my own lectures, while in some cases I was one of the organizers as well. For the sake of clarity, I organized them according to the organizing institutions, such being: *scientific societies* (Collegium Doctorum of Hungarian Reformed Church; The European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR); Gesellschaft für Evangelische Theologie (GET); Hungarian Association for the Academic Study of Religions; Bolyai Association), *partner universities* (Gereformeerde Hogeschool Zwolle, Theologische Fakultät der Universität Leipzig, Selye János University Komarno, Károli Gáspár Reformed University Budapest–Nagykőrös, Debrecen Reformed Theological University, Reformed Theological Academy of Sárospatak, Pápa Reformed Theological Seminary); *professional associations* (the National Professional Association of Reformed Pastors in Romania; the Reformed Teachers’ Association) and finally, *our own university* (Babeş–Bolyai University).

I ended the presentation of my research activity with a series of research projects carried out within the Babeş–Bolyai University and other foreign universities, such as: the “Howard and Edna Hang Kierkegaard Library” of the St. Olaf College Northfield/USA; the Debrecen Reformed Theological University; the Eötvös Lóránd University of Budapest.

(II.) The second part of my dissertation presents my teaching activity, which I carry out at the Faculty of Reformed Theology and Music of the Babeş–Bolyai University. I describe the regular theological subjects that I teach and note my own publications related to them. As a lecturer, I also continuously participated in teacher training courses organized by foreign universities (of the Netherlands and Germany) as well as domestic ones (in Cluj-Napoca/BBU; Alba Iulia; Sibiu; Blaj; Bucureşti; Timișoara). In addition to the classic university tutor-mentor role, I manage the students’ *Karácsony Sándor Research Circle of Religious Pedagogy and Pastoral Psychology* and starting with 2003 I am the yearly program manager of the professional training course called Bolyai Summer Academy for Protestant Religion Teachers.

(III.) In the third part I describe my service for the university and society. I am a member of several governing bodies of the university (the Senate, the Department Council, the Faculty Council), and I represent our Faculty on different forums. I have given numerous of lectures and trainings within church- and nongovernmental organizations, and I represent our faculty and disseminate my research results in the media (through articles, reports).

(IV.) In the last part of the dissertation, I present my professional career development plan. I will keep some of the research topics and academic duties, however, I intend to

introduce new aspects, projects with current topics for today's society approached through the prism of Protestant Ethics (e.g. bioethical issues).