

# Fritz Buri's "Gott in Amerika" : an American Appreciation and Response

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# Fritz Buri's «Gott in Amerika»

## An American Appreciation and Response

### 1.

Fritz Buri's recent "Gott in Amerika. Amerikanische Theologie seit 1960" is noteworthy because with uncommon perceptiveness and comprehensiveness, it succeeds in bringing to the attention of our theological brothers in German speaking lands the unquestionable richness and promise of recent American theology.

For forty years (and perhaps for much longer than that), the American relation to continental theology has been marked by overdependence, an inferiority complex, and a time-lag of from ten to twenty years. It is not merely that American theology has been deeply influenced by the remarkable theological productivity of contemporary European theology. It is also true that it has been largely *defined* by that *influence*<sup>1</sup>. Instead of mutual interchange and enrichment, the relationship has been one of dependence in which American theology has stood in awe of German theological scholarship, expected German theology to sketch out the horizon for each new theological advance, eagerly awaited these signs of change, and generally ignored (and even positively discounted) any possibility of an indigenously American contribution to theology arising out of the resources of the American experience. External signs of this symbiotic relationship are the more or less mandatory "pilgrimage to the continent" felt by American students and academics alike and the adulation and solicitude with which every new theological voice on the continent is recruited for the lecture halls of American centers of study. Unfortunately the attitudinal source of this dependence and inferiority is not in America alone. As almost every American student can testify from his European experience, there is all too often an unstated conviction among our continental peers that American theology and the level of American theological scholarship are something of a wasteland apart from continental influences and that the only possible relation between them can be that of master to student.

The single most striking feature of theology in the early 60's (the visibility of which may perhaps have been much more evident from the distance of

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<sup>1</sup> The only exceptions of international eminence are probably Reinhold Niebuhr and H. Richard Niebuhr. Despite their close connections with currents in continental theology, they were successful in incorporating a distinctively American perspective and experience in their theologies.

America than from the proximity of Europe) was, however, that Protestant theology was in a transitional period. The theological greats, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Gogarten, Bonhoeffer, Tillich, were either dead or no longer productive, and nobody was indisputably available to take their place. While there was much theological ferment, many claims to inheritance, and many assertions of significance, there was clearly nothing possessing the monumentality of the theological achievements of the past generation. In fact, the feeling increasingly grew (whether justified or not) that continental thought was “tired”, had “worn itself out”, and that a fresh source of theological vitality (if there was to be any at all) could only arise out of that strange blend of Teutonic theological sensitivity and the American experience of which every American theologian is so deeply aware. At this point, however, the situation as it has developed in the 60's seems to me highly ironic and deeply disappointing. While there has undoubtedly been much more contact between American and continental theologians in the last several years, there has been *little* real *interchange*.

It is against this background that Buri's latest work is of special significance for the American scene. To my knowledge, Buri is the first continental thinker of note seriously to attempt to engage recent American theology *on its own terms* – the implication clearly being that there is a gain to be had for both sides from the *mutual* learning process. “Gott in Amerika” is important not merely because Buri has intended to engage but because he has largely succeeded. To succeed, he has had to achieve a remarkable familiarity with what must appear at the outset as the almost chaotic plurality of American theology in the 60's. And more important, for the engagement to be real, he has had first to learn a new theological “idiom”, for in many respects the language, the assumptions, and the philosophical and experiential perspectives out of which American theologians think and write are different from those of continental thought.

Near the end of the book, in a section dealing with the very latest products of American theological scholarship, Buri devotes a chapter to my doctoral dissertation which was a critical appraisal of his theology.<sup>2</sup> It is taken as typifying a level and a style of thinking representative of the very youngest American theologians.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ch. D. Hardwick, *The Problem of Objectivity in Existentialist Theology as Illustrated by the Thought of Fritz Buri* (unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1967, scheduled for publication in 1971); F. Buri, *Gott in Amerika. Amerikanische Theologie seit 1960* (1970), pp. 244-253.

<sup>3</sup> Buri (n. 2), p. 244.

## 2.

My criticism of Buri intended to raise fundamental questions about the adequacy of his *methodology*, the purpose being in this way to point to certain epistemological conditions an adequate modern theology ought to meet. Buri's response, in turn (as any writer can testify who has fallen under his critical eye), is caustic and biting indeed. It is of some importance at the beginning, therefore, to note that our significant disagreement occurs within a broad frame of extensive agreement. This is to say that we do not disagree over the conditions of any possible theology whatsoever nor over the way in which those conditions evince themselves in the contemporary theological context.<sup>4</sup> We agree, that is, that the contemporary theological "Fragestellung" requires the thoroughgoing methodological reappraisal of *all* of the basic concepts from the tradition in which, to use a phrase of Tillich's, these concepts must be "broken" and hermeneutically reconstituted in terms of their primary intentionality. Our disagreement, then, occurs only with the question of how this task is most adequately realized, not with whether it ought to be done at all.

My criticism of Buri involves an argument with two levels.

(1) Followed with consistency, Buri's position on the problem of objectivity makes it impossible for him to give any real content to the Christian self-understanding. This is actually the case with certain doctrines he treats. In effect, the result of this argument means that it is impossible to do Christian theology on the terms Buri lays down. I acknowledge, however, that Buri intends to be nothing other than a Christian theologian.

(2) Buri does in fact *at certain points* give content to the Christian self-understanding. If I have been right with the first level of the argument, however, he can do this only by violating the consistency of his own principles, actually doing theology, so to speak, despite himself. The second level of the argument has cogency only provided that I have succeeded in disclosing the logic of Buri's basic methodological principles. But if I am correct, then it follows that the existentialist stance toward objectivity is inadequate as the basis for a full theology and that the foundations for theological recon-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

struction must require a more positive stance toward the possibility of objective description of self, world, and God from the perspective of faith. And the second level of the argument purports to show that Buri *inadvertently* confirms this.

Buri replies that the first level of my argument is successful only because my interpretation of the principles of self-understanding and objectivity and non-objectivity is partial and ignores crucial aspects of each of these principles which are taken into account in his own execution of his program. This being the case, Buri says it is not surprising that at the second level of the argument I should find features of his theology confirming my position but inconsistent with *my interpretation* of the implications of his principles. I can find these features only because, according to Buri, a rounded interpretation of his principles would have seen them to have been there from the beginning as indeed fully consistent with the principles of his theology. Consequently, Buri would be correct in his opinion that my whole argument reduces to a Quixotic jousting at windmills<sup>5</sup>. He would also be correct that I along with American theology in general have not yet comprehended radically enough the hermeneutical force of the dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity.

The disagreement between us, thus, boils down to the question whether I have given only a partial interpretation of Buri's principles. Or to state the problem more pointedly, it is a question of which of us has best understood the *logic* of those principles themselves (and not the *intentions* of the writer) in the consistent exemplification of their systematic ramifications. The issue here focuses on two aspects of the methodological principle of self-understanding: (1) the dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity, and (2) the notion of historicity ("Geschichtlichkeit"), in particular the historicity of the Christian self-understanding.

I must acknowledge that Buri makes a telling point on the second level of my argument when he emphasizes that he has always affirmed as following from his analysis of the nature and limits of knowledge that theological assertions are unavoidably and indispensably objective in character.<sup>6</sup> Although this point was adequately made in the context of the manuscript as a whole, in my desire to drive home the force of my criticism, it was not given sufficient emphasis at the second level of the argument, and in the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 249, 251-252.

published version of the manuscript a more balanced account will have to be given. Buri also emphasizes that never losing sight of this point is what distinguishes his position from other existential theologies which seek in some fashion or another to “overcome” the subject-object schema. It is legitimate, therefore, for him to indicate that I am not entirely correct in claiming that my criticism of his theology, because he is the most consistent and thoroughgoing advocate of an existential method in theology, applies *mutatis mutandis* to the use made of the problem of objectivity in existential theology in general.<sup>7</sup>

This correction does not, however, undercut my argument. The questions must still be pressed concerning the status of the objective assertions Buri accepts and whether they are legitimate given his principles. If some *critical* account of *these* assertions is not possible, then one wonders why a hermeneutical reconstruction of the falsely *objective* assertions of the tradition is necessary at all. Here Buri's comment about other existential theologies is instructive, for he says, “Diese – im Unterschied zu mir – meinen, das Subjekt-Objekt-Schema überwinden und zu einem gegenständlichen Reden vom Nichtobjektivierbaren gelangen zu können”.<sup>8</sup> If Buri's objective assertions do not intend to be “an objective language about the non-objective”, then what are they?

Buri bases his theology on a sharp distinction between (a) the transcendental limits of objective knowledge about self, world and God and (b) the non-objectivity and non-objectifiability of the enactment (“Vollzug”) of unconditioned selfhood and the Transcendence-relation contained therein. The critical perception of the dialectic between objectivity and non-objectivity allows Buri to designate as *myths* any transgression (including objective theological language) of the limits of objectivity. Such illicit mythological language can become a *symbolic* expression of faith, however, when, in a critical consciousness of the nature and limits of objectivity, objective mythological language becomes either an *occasion* for or an *expression* of a non-objective act of self-understanding.

The use of symbolic language as an occasion for the enactment of a self-understanding we can leave to be treated below. The crucial

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

question concerns such usage when it “expresses a self-understanding”. Buri’s analysis of myth and symbol does provide him with a principle for a critical appraisal of traditional objective doctrinal language. This principle warrants his interpreting the *objective form* of that language as meaning something different from the apparent force of its ostensible objectivity. The crucial question concerns how we are to understand objective theological assertions about the content of faith (and not merely about methodology) that issue as interpretations on the far side of this critical consciousness. Two options are available to Buri at this point. Either such objective *interpretations* of the traditional objective language are different ways of saying no more than that the act of faith will be a non-objective actualization of selfhood, or they will be *more adequate, objective* claims about self, world and God than come to expression in the ostensible objectivity of the traditional language.

If the first option is chosen, then *all* theological interpretations become no more than a restatement of the *methodological* principles of the dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity and of self-understanding. Faith here loses all content because theological interpretations can say only that faith will be a non-objective, transcending act of self-definition. Theological interpretations could not specify what the content of that act is; they could only specify that whatever it is it will be a non-objective act. There are instances in Buri’s interpretations of specific doctrines in which this kind of interpretation does in fact occur. The meaning of a doctrine or of a part of a doctrine, that is, is taken as a way of guarding the non-objective character of faith so integral to it.<sup>9</sup> But clearly Buri intends more, so we must turn to the second option.

If this option is chosen, then it is possible to articulate the content of faith, but given Buri’s methodological assumptions, is it possible to distinguish such objective interpretations from myth? The concept of symbol might appear to offer a way out. But for Buri, symbols refer to the mythological objectivity when it is held in a critical consciousness of the dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity. Symbols cannot refer to the theological interpretation of the content of the symbols. Symbols *qua* symbols still have the con-

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<sup>9</sup> Cf., e.g., F. Buri, *Dogmatik als Selbstverständnis des christlichen Glaubens*, 2 (1962), pp. 406, 513.

ceptual form of the traditional, objective doctrine. Their symbolic content derives solely from the *way* the traditional objectivity is maintained in consciousness. This means that the symbols themselves require theological interpretation, and such interpretation must in some sense involve a direct, non-mythological and non-symbolic form of objectivity by means of which their content can be explicated. Otherwise one has symbols interpreting symbols. Are Buri's own theological interpretations symbolic thus themselves requiring further theological interpretation?

As I tried to indicate in detail in the dissertation, some of the actual objective interpretations Buri does make state or imply objective claims about the self and the world.<sup>10</sup> These are claims founded on the configuration traditional objective doctrines receive by their appropriation in the non-objective act of self-understanding when that act is itself the hermeneutical basis for their interpretation. But as claims about the self and the world, they seem to overstep the bounds Buri has placed on objective description by his analysis of the objective structure of consciousness. If this is the case, then these interpretations are themselves symbolic, and we are still left uncertain as to what the actual content of faith is. The problem is that Buri's analysis of the dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity cuts too wide a swath to be fully coherent with the execution of his own theological program. It is for this reason that I can charge at the second level of my argument that the objective theological assertions Buri does make are in conflict with the requirements of his own principles.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf., e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 424, 432, 434, 490-491.

<sup>11</sup> Buri's position on the relationship among the non-objectivity of faith, an illicit objectivity, and the content of theological assertions is made unclear by a rather consistent confusion in his thought between the *meaning* and the *justification* of theological assertions. In giving the interpretation of a theological assertion, Buri too often criticizes a false objectivity by showing the illicit character of an objective *justification* (i.e. proof) of the assertion. The problem with this is that the meaning of any assertion is logically distinct from the warrants (if any) that would justify holding it (unless meaning is identified with the method of verification, a position Buri rejects). To criticize the justification of a false objectivity is unhelpful in illuminating what it is about a false objectivity itself that distorts the meaning of an assertion. *Ibid.*, p. 424.



## 2.

To see the full force of this problem, it is necessary to take up the further theme of *Geschichtlichkeit*. Buri's position that he can give content to faith hinges on the claim that faith never occurs apart from historicist embodiment. While the concept of non-objective self-understanding serves as the methodological basis for his theology, Buri is clear that taken alone this concept is purely formal. A self-understanding never occurs in the formal abstractness of the philosophical analysis of what a self-understanding is but always in the concrete embodiment of an historical act. The notion of historicity serves to delineate three features of this act: (a) that the act is an unconditioned transcending in its "Vollzug" of all objectively specifiable conditions of the self, (b) that the transcending is not absolute but is historically situated, and (c) that its historical situatedness provides the internal differentiation or concrete content by which the self-understanding is embodied. Any self-understanding receives its content, in other words, by its historicity. Furthermore, the historicity of faith means that there can be no transcendence of historicity, except at a purely formal and empty level, by the man who thinks about faith, i.e. the theologian. It is this analysis that warrents Buri's material principle that the content of the Christian self-understanding is specified by the history of the Christian tradition as it is appropriated non-objectively in faith.<sup>12</sup> A Christian self-understanding is Christian because it is historically situated by the Christian tradition.

Buri's entire case depends, therefore, on whether he can specify the historicity of the Christian self-understanding. Through an analysis of his Christology, I argue that Buri does not and cannot specify it, that the reason for this follows from his understanding of the problem of objectification, and that those exceptions where he does give some specification involve a *de facto* modification of his position on objectivity (i.e., the argument above). I demonstrate this by showing that the actual content he gives the specifically Christian self-understanding reduces to nothing more than a restatement of his *purely formal* concept of self-understanding in general. There is, in other words, no specifically Christian historicity

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<sup>12</sup> Buri, *Dogmatik* (n.9), 1 (1956), pp. 442-443.

but only a way of interpreting Christian doctrinal statements as mythological ways of stating an abstract and historically empty philosophical principle.

The question turns, then, on whether Buri has himself fully understood the concept of historicity. Here it is instructive to examine two statements from Buri's response to me on this point:

Wenn sich sodann herausstellt, daß sich die Interpretation, die sich mir aus meinem Verständnis der christlichen Überlieferung ergibt, nicht von einer allgemein menschlichen unterscheidet, sondern sich grundsätzlich auch unter Absehung von seiner besonderen Prägung durch die christliche Überlieferung als Wahrheit des Personseins, zu dem sich der Mensch gnadenweise berufen erfahren kann, erweisen läßt und als solche neue, über geschichtliche, speziell konfessionelle und religionsgeschichtliche Grenzen hinausführende Gemeinschaft zu stiften vermag, so steht dies gerade nicht im Widerspruch zur Geschichtlichkeit menschlichen Selbstverständnisses, sondern bedeutet vielmehr dessen Wahrheit und Erfüllung...<sup>13</sup>

Gleichzeitig vermerkt er auch, daß es in meinem System kein eigentliches Lehrstück von der Person Christi gebe, weil die Paradoxie der Menschwerdung als Symbol der Paradoxie von Gegenständlichkeit und Ungegenständlichkeit im Selbstverständnis des Glaubens das Strukturprinzip der ganzen Dogmatik darstelle. Diese Funktion der Christologie als Strukturprinzip nimmt freilich Hardwick zum Anlaß, mir noch einmal Auflösung der Dogmatik in bloß formale, inhaltlose Bestimmungen zum Vorwurf zu machen. Davon, daß das Prinzip zur sachgemäßen Interpretation des christlichen Überlieferungsstoffes verwendet wird, nimmt er merkwürdigerweise nicht Notiz, und auch nicht von dem andern Umstand, daß von diesem Stoff, der der christlichen Dogmatik vorgegeben ist, deren Christlichkeit herrührt. Statt dessen meint er, ein derartiger Ausweis der Christlichkeit auf Grund des Bezogenseins auf die christliche Tradition genüge nicht – wobei er nicht beachtet, daß er damit gegenüber der Dogmatik eine Forderung erhebt, die mit deren von ihm doch sonst anerkannten Geschichtlichkeit unvereinbar ist<sup>14</sup>.

These quotations require several different comments. First, I do not deny that Buri's structural principle makes possible an interpretation of the Christian tradition. My only question is whether this interpretation is one that preserves the historicity of the Christian self-understanding. Second, it deserves notice that Buri's concept of the incarnation ("Menschwerdung") is not itself a "Strukturprinzip" (whatever the methodological richness it may have) but is a symbol for a "Strukturprinzip" which can be stated directly

<sup>13</sup> Buri, *Gott* (n. 2), p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

in non-mythological and non-symbolic language and which is nothing more than a re-statement of the purely formal principle of self-understanding in general. Third, and most important, both quotations seem to make evident that Buri sees no problem in saying that the historicity of the Christian self-understanding has no other content than a re-statement of the formal principle of self-understanding. The content of the historicity of the Christian self-understanding in this instance means nothing more than the historical occasion for stating the purely formal principle of *self-understanding* which itself receives *no historicity*. My argument is not, “der Ausweis der Christlichkeit auf Grund des Bezogenseins auf die christliche Tradition genüge nicht”, but that Buri has not in fact articulated that “Bezogensein” adequately. If I can make that argument, then I have not “eine Forderung erhebt, die mit deren von ihm doch sonst anerkannten Geschichtlichkeit unvereinbar ist”.

Buri's principle of self-understanding is a purely formal philosophical statement (apart from any particular historicist embodiment) of what it means to be a person. Against the background of the above discussion of historicity, this formal principle gives rise to the following exclusive alternative: *Either* Christianity defines the necessary and sufficient conditions of being a person (so that to become a person one must define himself by the Christian historicity) *or* having a Christian self-understanding is one way of being a person. It may, of course, be true that Christianity has a universal aspect insofar as it defines the conditions of a truly fulfilled humanity so that true personhood is equivalent to the content of Christianity. But it is worth noting that such a definition can be true only in the material mode of some content. In contrast, Buri's definition of personhood is entirely formal. It is doubtful, therefore, that in his sense of personhood he would want to accept the first option. The implication of the second alternative is, however, that the Christian self-understanding is actually *differentiated* from other possible self-understandings (i.e. ways of being a person) by the content of its historicity, not that that historicity is merely the occasion for becoming a person in general. In other words, it seems important to say that the Christian self-understanding is one among several self-understandings in which men can realize their personhood. Becoming and being a Christian means actualizing ones

existence in ways that involve real alternatives to other possible ways. But if the formal principle of self-understanding articulates nothing more than the conditions of *any possible* self-understanding, then the differentiation of one self-understanding from another can only arise out of its historicity. If this historicity does nothing more than provide the historically circumscribed occasion for actualizing self-understanding in general, if, that is, it only re-states the formal principle, then it does not in fact differentiate the Christian self-understanding from any other. My argument here in no way entails a rejection of the position of existential interpretation that objective Christian doctrines are to be interpreted in terms of the modes of existence they involve. My argument simply rests on the assumption that being a Christian means adopting a mode of existence different from other possible options.

If as Buri seems to think, on the other hand, the historicity of the Christian self-understanding is compatible with the purely formal content of nothing more than the principle of self-understanding, then he opens himself to three highly damaging points regarding the theological task. – (1) First, in this latter instance, the only meaning historicity can have is the purely formal one of indicating that the actualization of self-understanding will be a non-objective act of the self. It will not, however, define *what* that act is in its concrete embodiment. Since the content of the Christian self-understanding will be limited to the formal concept of self-understanding in general, it will be impossible to give a theological account of the actual embodied form of the act of the Christian mode of existence itself. This means that there will be something like a Christian self-understanding within the Christian self-understanding, but it will be impossible to give any description of *what* the actual instance of the Christian self-understanding is. The *actual historicity* of any particular Christian self-understanding would be as multifarious as the acts of individual selves. And there would be no structural relation that could be specified between the Christian self-understanding in general and the individual Christian self-understandings. The Christian self-understanding open to theological analysis could do no more than say that there will be *some* historic actualization by particular selves. The upshot of this would be to make faith ineffable. – (2) The second problem concerns the relationship between the assertions of the Christian tradition and the actualization of self-understanding. If the historicity of this tradition does not define the actual content of a possibility of existence but only re-states the formal principle, then the relationship between the assertions of the Christian tradition and the actualizations of the Christian self-understanding can only be a causal one. There could be no intrinsic relation between the content of mythological symbols which bring about the effect and the content of the effect itself or, to put it differently, no structural relation

between what a Christian confesses and what he is *qua* Christian. The question of the meaning of these symbols becomes irrelevant. The only basis for adopting the particular symbolic universe of Christianity rather than some other would be an empirical demonstration that it causes the desired effect more often than another. – (3) It follows from this, third, that the only way to avoid this merely causal connection is for the content of the Christian tradition (the proper historicity of faith) to provide the actual definition and differentiation of the Christian self-understanding. The assumption here is that being a Christian entails choosing a mode of existence to which there are real alternatives. Since the formal principle of self-understanding is a definition of authentic human personhood, this assumption means that being a Christian is only one possible way of being a person. It follows that being a Christian is something different from being, say, a Buddhist, a Moslem, or an atheistic humanist. It also follows that the differentiation derives from different historicities and that their difference is not the merely accidental one of using different symbolic universes of discourse which ultimately say the same thing but that these different historicities involve differences of content which specify real differences in actualized modes of existence.

How can these differences be specified staying within the limits of theology as existential interpretation? One way is to argue that differing non-objective self-understandings are themselves founded on differing belief claims concerning the ultimate constitution and relations among self, world and God. This is to say that to the extent that we find it necessary to differentiate self-understandings from one another by giving real content to various historicities, to that same extent we must ground these real differences on differing objective, ontological claims. It is important to note that this conclusion in no way need qualify the sense in which an existential theology wants to say that the act of faith itself is a non-objective act of self-understanding. But it will necessitate affirming the possibility of a type of objective description within an existential theology which Buri's theology seems to make problematic. It is in this fashion that my criticism of Buri's position on historicity leads to the second level of my argument concerning the necessity of modifying his position on objectivity and non-objectivity.

### 3.

It is important in conclusion to gain some perspective on how this rather restricted methodological debate between Buri and myself fits into the larger field of the *contemporary* theological prob-

*lematic*. The extraordinary importance of Buri's thought for contemporary theology derives from the courage, imagination and persistence with which he has confronted the demand to rethink "to their ground" the hermeneutical foundations of Christian theology. If the recent flurry of writings in Europe and America on the problem of secularity has any significance at all, it is to highlight this demand, for in the final analysis, secularity is a theological problem because it raises the question of the possibility of Christian theology as such. The debate between Buri and myself over the question of objectivity must be seen in this larger context not as a difference over irreconcilable presuppositions but as a joint effort to clarify one facet of the rethinking going on throughout Christian theology today.

The true stature of Buri's theological achievement resides in the brilliance with which he is able time and time again to reinterpret traditional theological assertions.<sup>15</sup> Methodologically, Buri's work is significant because his concentration on the problem of objectivity and non-objectivity represents his attempt to address radically the demands of the contemporary theological situation. The difficulties I have pointed out with Buri's methodology, however, generate serious problems with the admittedly brilliant reinterpretations he actually achieves: (i) at many points the reinterpretations seem to be incoherent with the methodology and (ii) the uncertainties with the methodological concepts of objectivity, non-objectivity, and historicity leave the precise cognitive status and range of the reinterpretations unclear. The point here is that without fundamental re-thinking of the way in which Christian assertions not merely express a self-understanding but refer objectively to the world, the actual existential interpretation of these assertions "schwebt in der Luft". The possibility of a reconstructed Christian theology in a secular world in which the very possibility of Christian theology itself is in question depends on not only being able to show how Christian assertions refer but also on showing how they are grounded. It is at this more fundamental level that questions must be

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<sup>15</sup> This claim is vividly confirmed by another of Buri's recent books, *Der Pantokrator. Ontologie und Eschatologie als Grundlage der Lehre von Gott* (1969), which brilliantly demonstrates Buri's capacity to give imaginative reinterpretation to many Christian doctrines.

raised about Buri's theology which can only be answered by objective, ontological reflection.

The cognitive and ontological status of Buri's doctrine of God is a particularly striking instance of this problem, and a brief discussion of it can serve to bring these remarks to a close. The problem is focused by Buri's central methodological claim that the actualization of an unconditioned self-understanding is grounded in a relation to *Transcendence*. An important question is whether, given Buri's understanding of the dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity, the truth of this claim is compatible with knowledge of its truth. More important, however, is the question of its meaning. In particular, what is the relation here between the concept of Transcendence and what Christians call "God"?<sup>16</sup> If "God" is nothing more than a mythological expression for the unconditioned character of the relation to Transcendence, then we still do not know what Transcendence means. And without some knowledge of *what* Transcendence is, how is it possible to warrant the claim that the non-objective act of self-understanding is constituted by such a relation? Furthermore, Buri goes on to say that Transcendence is personal and that only by acknowledging its personal character can one properly account for personal being.<sup>17</sup> How are we to take this? Is this an indirect proof for a personal God? But Buri has argued that no such proof is possible. Are we to take this as an ontological claim about the character of ultimate reality? What, then, are we to make of Buri's assertions that Transcendence is non-objective and non-objectifiable?

The point is that all of these assertions require additional methodological grounding. Yet it seems difficult to provide such grounding within the limitations Buri has placed on himself by his dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity. It will not do to reply that these are all claims which are grounded on nothing other than the non-objective act of the Christian self-understanding itself. In the first place, they are still objective claims the referential status of which is uncertain given Buri's understanding of their locus within the non-objective act of self-understanding. In the second place, these

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<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately an appeal to Jaspers at this point is unhelpful because Jaspers is as unclear on the status of the concept of Transcendence as is Buri.

<sup>17</sup> Buri, *Dogmatik* (n. 9), 2, p. 104.

*claims* are themselves the methodological basis for interpreting the *assertions* of the Christian self-understanding. Those assertions cannot, therefore, be used to warrant the intelligibility of the principle by means of which they are interpreted.

Buri's typical reply at this point is to appeal to the praying man:

Die Frage, ob, was mit Transzendenz gemeint ist, auch außerhalb und unabhängig vom Selbstverständnis des Glaubens vorhanden sei, kann nur gestellt werden, wenn man nicht begriffen hat, was Selbstverständnis ist, oder weil man in Aberglauben befangen ist bzw. den andern auf solchen festlegen will. Der beste Prüfstein für das rechte Verständnis der Wirklichkeit Gottes ist das Gebet. Wer beweisen will, daß der Beter es mit Gott und nicht bloß mit sich selber zu tun hat, dem wird darüber Transzendenz zum Nichts. Aber für den Beter im Akt des Gebetes ist die Frage, ob der Gott, an den er sich wendet, existiere und ob er Personcharakter besitze, in Wahrheit «gegenstandslos» – anders würde er nicht beten, sondern über das Beten nachdenken (was zu Zeiten auch nützlich, aber etwas anderes ist als Beten!)<sup>18</sup>.

There is no question, of course, that a Christian while he is praying believes he is praying to a personal God and that if he begins to raise theological questions he ceases to pray. But Buri himself acknowledges that theology is not prayer. The theological question concerns the grounding of the principles by means of which the self-understanding of the praying man can be interpreted. And those principles cannot be grounded by an appeal to the beliefs of the praying man they are intended to interpret. If this is not the case, then one wonders if Buri's whole theological enterprise does not reduce to the hermeneutically opaque statement that Christians, as evidenced by the fact that they pray, believe in a personal God, and then one is forced to question what the upshot is to Buri's radical reconstruction of the methodological foundations of Christian theology.

This last question is obviously not intended seriously. The force of these remarks, however, is meant to point to the need for a more fundamental ontological grounding of the principles of existential interpretation than Buri has himself provided. It was to point to this wider field of the contemporary theological problematic that my extensive analysis and criticism of Buri's use of the dialectic of objectivity and non-objectivity was undertaken. I am myself by no means clear as to how this ontological grounding is to be achieved,

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<sup>18</sup> Buri, *Gott* (n. 2), p. 249.



and I believe that this uncertainty and groping characterizes almost all of the contemporary theological situation. I am confident, however, that the most exciting prospects for contemporary theological reflection lie on this horizon.

Much of the affection in which Buri is held by the contemporary American theological community derives not merely from his willingness to hear us but also from his readiness to engage us on these most far-reaching of all theological questions. Beyond the mutual criticism of our debate, these remarks have intended to be a testament of that affection and a statement of appreciation. Buri himself will understand their appropriateness since the very writing of "Gott in Amerika" was something of a demand of his own systematic principles. Rooted at the center of his conception of "doing theology" is the notion that despite the isolation of hard intellectual work, beyond all systems, and amidst significant differences all real theology must be communication reaching out *von Glaube zu Glaube* in an appeal wherein we are all brothers.

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## Zu Charley D. Hardwicks Kritik an der Theologie des Selbstverständnisses

Es erübrigt sich zu sagen, wie sehr ich Hardwicks Sicht der Beziehungen zwischen amerikanischer und europäischer Theologie teile und seine Würdigung meines Buches «Gott in Amerika» in diesem Rahmen zu schätzen weiß. Zur Klärung der von ihm an meiner theologischen Position geübten Kritik und zu einer fruchtbaren Weiterführung des hier in bezug auf grundlegende Fragen in der theologischen Situation der Gegenwart angehobenen Gesprächs zwischen den Kontinenten scheinen mir aber wenigstens folgende vier Feststellungen nützlich zu sein:

1. Ich habe alles Verständnis dafür, daß Hardwick am Schluß seiner, die wesentlichen Anliegen meiner Theologie betreffenden, kritischen Ausführungen eingesteht, daß er selber keineswegs wisse, wie die von ihm als positive Ergänzung seiner Kritik geforderte