

Contingency and transcendence. Challenges for theology.

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It is not the fact that young people deliberately no longer want to interpret their lives in established religious terms that is astonishing but the fact that we – in any case, we theologians – have so few categories available to understand it. The meaning of ‘meaning’ may be that it liberates us from the feeling of being lost in an unknown environment and that it helps us find an adequate attitude regarding (disparate) events in our lives. What then does it *mean* that only a small majority (52%) in this research project understands positive and negative experiences in terms of good and bad luck? (Ganzevoort, 2008) Detailed and scrutinized analyses have to be developed in order to understand the life world of the young people interviewed in the Kampen study. But a closer look at theological categories of salvation, blessing, providence, grace and others is also welcome. Is theology ready to open itself up to ways of experiencing life that go beyond the well-established world of the confessional tradition? Are the traditional interpretative schemes with which theology is accustomed to working really open to include the experience of the vicissitudes of life in terms of luck?

One might be tempted to say that these young people are also leaving behind the possibility of a theological hermeneutic by rejecting the conventional religious schemes of interpretation. I do not believe that. I would rather argue the opposite: the way they deal with experiences of contingency challenges theology to develop new schemes of interpretation beyond the traditional ones. In this article I want to offer some conceptual clarifications that might be helpful for that enterprise by (1) sketching the contours of the postmodern life course (the ‘choice biography’) with which 21st-century generations are confronted, (2) exploring the consequences of this life course structure for interpreting ‘life events’ in a meaningful way (in terms of fate, contingency or luck), and (3) formulating some directions in which theology might develop schemes of thought that are able to cope with this way of experiencing life: a rethinking of transcendence and a cultivation of contingency.

1. Mastering a ‘Choice Biography’

In our highly modern society, the human life course becomes a matter of individual construction. Traditional institutional frameworks of education, marriage and family, work and retirement, which were self-evident until far into the 20th century, are losing their regulating normative function. The organization of life courses is undergoing a process of de-institutionalization. The manner in which people organize their lives over time is no longer embedded in a compelling network of social expectations but seems to be the object of personal choice. Sexual identity, marriage, getting and raising children, work and career, care, education have all become life style options, for which traditional blueprints no longer obtain.

Modern sociologists such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens portray the modern life-course as one in which individual choices and strategic planning are central. Giddens describes the identity of the modern self as (the result of) a self-reflexive project. In a post-traditional society, reflexivity – as the

regularized use of knowledge – is a constitutive characteristic of modern institutions and practices. ‘Future’ no longer refers to events still to come. ‘Futures’ have to be organized reflexively as ‘possible worlds’ – in the plural. Different scenarios should be constantly open for revision in the light of new ideas and developments (Giddens, 1991, p. 20). Postmodern life becomes a shaky and risky business. ‘Modernity is a post-traditional order, in which the question, “How should I live?” has to be answered in day-to-day decisions about how to behave, what to wear and what to eat – and many other things – as well as interpreted within the temporal unfolding of self-identity.’ (Giddens, 1991, p.14).

In a densely written article, Ulrich Beck describes in fourteen points what living a Life on One’s Own under postmodern conditions actually means: it is quite a job.

1. Perhaps for the first time in history we can live lives of our own, but paradoxically we only can do so in a *highly differentiated* society, compartmentalised in a plurality of functional systems. We have to fulfil our roles as tax payer, student, voter, patient, husband, sister, colleague, etc. simultaneously and find ways of integrating these different and sometimes conflicting identities in a consistent and integrated self- identity.
2. Our own life is not our own! In organising our life course, we are completely *dependent on institutions* (stock exchange, food industry, traffic, internet provider etc.) that determine our daily lives. We might be free from the pressure of traditions; but now we are bound by institutions.
3. This means that, in order to live our own lives (and not those of anonymous others), we have to stand up, take our lives in hand, and reflect, choose and organize this life on our own. Our life course is a matter of *self-reflection and self-organization*.
4. Our life course becomes a *risky choice biography*. A successful outcome is never guaranteed but depends – as far as it depends on ourselves – on the lucky or unlucky choices we make.
5. We *condemned to activity*. Even when struck by fate or bad luck, we have to find ways of coping with it. We are what we make of ourselves, even of what we make of our failures and deceptions.
6. We are personally responsible for our failures: they are completely our own. Even societal crises (mass unemployment, poverty, illness) are interpreted as *individual risks*. There is no mediation between individual and society. Getting or losing a job is a matter of our own activity combined with good or bad luck, rather than one of social policy for which politicians might be held responsible.
7. Our own lives are influenced by (and ultimately dependent on) global processes that are less and less under individual or local control. Our own, locally lived lives are constantly broken up by global events.
8. In the pressure of inventing lives on our own, traditions and communities are less and less helpful. They have lost their self-evident legitimacy. Modernity implies an individualized and *de-traditionalized* form of life. Traditions have to be reflexively re-invented.

9. Living on our own without the help of conventions and traditions is an *experimental* life of trial and error. The future can no longer be deduced from the past.
10. This requires a constant attitude of *reflexivity*. We need to be well informed, discuss and reflect upon the ins and outs of today in order to ‘manage’ our future lives.
11. Despite all the hardship of living lives on our own, we *value* this activity *highly*. The intrinsic value of a personal life has become a dominant value; self-development and self-realization have become a high ideal.
12. Though actively pursued, self-identity remains an impossible ideal. The postmodern self is radically *non-identical*. I live my own life only by reaching out to it.
13. The value of lives of our own is translated into a *morality from below*; autonomy and self-determination are dominant.
14. Living lives of our own is a chance of ‘once in a lifetime’. There is no metaphysical heaven, no eternal life after death, to repair or compensate for missed opportunities. There is only *one life before death*: our own! (Beck, 1995) In sum: it is a heavy job.

In this depiction of postmodern choice biography the necessity of strategic life planning (‘colonizing the future’, as Giddens puts it (Giddens, 1991, p. 114), is an important element. One has to counter the unforeseeable risks of the risk society as far as possible by imagining the different scenarios, assessing and evaluating their consequences, and making a best interest choice. Self-management replaces religious Providence as well as the social collectivity in a welfare state. In planning a life of one’s own, one takes over to some extent both the premodern role of God and that of the nation-state in modernity. In a risky, globalizing context, individual control becomes an important device, according to Giddens. ‘Mastery’ is the new moral demand that replaces the prescriptive social morality of traditional society (Giddens, 1991, p. 102). ‘Self-direction’ turns into the new definition of the adult life. People who cannot cope with the pressures of biographical construction will get into serious trouble. Because the sense and meaning of life is no longer given, it now depends on the personal success of the realization of one’s own ambitions and on the narrative creativity that enables one to reconstruct the successes and failures in one’s life story as a more or less coherent whole.

2. Risk Society and the Awareness of Contingency

The young people presented by our research seem to embody the new conditions of postmodern choice biography. On the one hand, they appropriate the responsibility for their life project by energetically rejecting the belief that a transcendent power rules their life with blessings or punishments. (Ganzevoort, 2008, p 4 ???) They prefer the image of life as a ‘(cross) road’ or a ‘journey’ as the most popular metaphor for their life course. The traveller has the choice of which road to take and perhaps regrets the ‘road not taken’ (as in Robert Frost’s famous poem). Images that leave no room for the element of choice are ruled out. (Ganzevoort, 2008, p. 7 ???)

On the other hand, however, they show a clear scepticism towards the belief that they are masters of their own lives. Values that express the idea of ‘having their lives totally under control’ (social recognition, achieving something, having a good job, living an exciting life, self control, being good looking, having abilities) (Ganzevoort, 2008, p.7) are not very popular: they score low among these respondents. Concerning the vicissitudes of life they know what it is to have good or bad luck. This *high awareness of contingency* is remarkable for this new generation in the risk society, perhaps even more noteworthy than its rejection of conventional religious schemes of interpretation. Living a postmodern choice biography, they show how striking Beck’s perception of the *non-identity* of self-identity is: even though they are ‘condemned’ to plan their life course, they frankly admit that they do not have command over their future. Forced to organize their lives with the help of planning strategies, they have to acknowledge that things (e.g., important values such as friendship or health) sometimes ‘just happen’, unforeseeably and uncontrollably. The respondents prefer concepts like good and bad luck, whereas an interpretation of contingency in general and less determined ‘(by) chance’ is seen as much less preferable (10-11% for both positive and negative experiences) by them. Events are interpreted in terms of intrinsic meaning for their personal lives.

How is this high consciousness of contingency to be understood? Is it simply the display of a pragmatic attitude towards the uncertainties of living a risky life in a risk society, or is it something else? I would like to propose some conjectures that reach further.

Antony Giddens offers an interesting but only sociological account of this risk awareness. I will present his view but would also like to add some more philosophical observations below. Beck writes that living in a global risk society means becoming increasingly conscious of ‘the inevitability of living with dangers that are *remote* from the control not only of individuals, but of large organizations, including states; and are *of high intensity* and *life threatening* for millions and potentially for the whole of humanity’. (Giddens, 1990, p. 131). Giddens speaks of the runaway, ‘juggernaut character’ of modernity. Living under its conditions raises the awareness of a sense of *fortuna* in the postmodern self, a sense that is close to a premodern worldview. ‘Fate, a feeling that things will take their own course anyway, thus reappears at the core of a world which is supposedly taking rational control of its own affairs.’ (Giddens, 1990, 133).

The life span is organized around ‘open thresholds of experience’ and no longer around ritualized passages in fixed communities. Coherence of identity-over-time no longer consists in belonging to (a) social group(s), but has to be constructed personally. Every radical transition in the trajectory of life has the potentiality of leading to an identity crisis and is often experienced that way by individuals. At such ‘fateful moments’ it becomes obvious how fragile and problematic the biographical reflexive project can be. A person’s ontological security, her sense of trust in the basic goodness of the flow of life *for her* personally, may be shattered. Fateful are the very moments when people have to make important decisions, unforeseeable in their consequences but crucial for their personal future. Fateful too are the moments of existential crisis when a choice can no longer be made; events that brutally interrupt the expected trajectory of one’s life (illness and death, violence, a traffic accident) have to be endured. As irruptions of daily life, these uncontrollable events represent a severe threat to a scheduled plan for one’s life. Giddens describes four possible

reactions for coping with such contingencies: 1. *pragmatic acceptance*: ‘shit happens’, but we have to survive anyway, 2. *a sustained optimism*: in the end reasonableness will win; a continuous faith in providential Enlightenment; 3. *cynical pessimism*: we might live on top of a volcano, but we keep laughing; and 4. *radical engagement*: an attitude of practical contestation towards perceived sources of danger. (Giddens, 1990, 137)

3. Fate, Contingency and the Christian Religion

Although Giddens’ typology of reactions is illuminating with respect to the sociological processes involved, it is fairly unsatisfactory from a philosophical point of view. The patterns of the reactions describe comprehensible and common psychological techniques of risk assessment rather than personal and existential attitudes towards the fatefulness of human life. In order to elucidate better the challenges of the way ‘our’ young people are dealing with contingency, I think it is necessary to look more carefully at the general category of uncontrollable and unforeseeable events. Conceptually, we need to distinguish ‘risks’ from ‘fate’ and, in turn, ‘fate’ from ‘contingency’. All these concepts have different philosophical and historical backgrounds.

1. First, the *risks* analysed by Beck and Giddens are related to catastrophic events that are the result of the uncontrollableness of interrelated technological processes in the complex setting of a globalizing world. ‘Tchernobyl’ (1986) is the classic example; within the runaway world in which we live we have to say: ‘Tchernobyl is everywhere.’ The rational calculations and precautions of technology assessment tend to minimize the risk that uncontrollable events will happen. More technology is used to save us from the ‘irrational’ consequences of technology.
2. Risk, as the calculated chance that an event might take place, must be distinguished from *fate* as experienced and interpreted in the pre-modern world. The classical Greek culture linked fate (Greek: *tuchè*; Latin: *fortuna*) with the necessities (*anangkè*) of nature. Illness and death, war and poverty were all seen as the results of the workings of a hidden divine/natural world order that did not indulge the fragility of human finitude. Fateful moments occurred when humans were confronted with the hardship caused by the divine or natural law. Human fate is comparable with the fate of a mosquito in a human bedroom on a summer night: it may be lucky and have a good time, but the chance that it gets smashed against the wall is greater. *Tuchè* refers to the impersonal ‘that what happens’, the blind causalities in life; philosophy, understood as the art of making life better, was meant to develop *technè* in order to resist the impersonal arbitrariness of *tuchè* (Nussbaum, 1986)
3. In the classical worldview, *fortuna* is related to cosmic necessity. This way of experiencing the world shifts completely in the Christian era. In Christian experience there is a radical distinction between the transcendence of God and the immanence of creation. Only God is necessary; his creation could not have been or could have been otherwise. Contingency, as the philosophical concept referring to ‘that what could not have been, or that what could have been otherwise’ (‘contingens est, quod nec est impossibile nec necessarium’; ‘contingens est, quod potest non esse’), has its origin in the Christian doctrine of

creation and refers to the mode of existence of the whole of creation, including the cosmic or natural law.

From God's point of view, nothing that happens in the world happens necessarily; everything in the world depends solely on the will of the Creator and Sustainer. From the perspective of the experiences of the human being, however, there are two kinds of contingency, despite the fact that they are identical from a metaphysical point of view. Not everything that happens by chance in our lives is an unchangeable 'fate'. Instead of continuing to write this article, I can decide to have a walk or drink a cup of coffee. It is contingent in the sense that the course of events could have been otherwise than it was (I continued writing). Other contingent events, however, are less innocent; they are irrevocable: they might – according to the will of God – not have happened, but they actually did happen. God could have decided otherwise, but He did not *and we cannot change it* anymore. The basic facts of human life – being born, having to live our lives and to endure existence, dying – are such unalterable events. In the Christian understanding, however, they are contingent, resting entirely on the hidden will of God, who alone is necessary. It could all have been otherwise: the very fact of my existence (and that of others, and the world, and the whole of creation) depends solely on the grace of God. (Marquard, 1986, p. 128 f.; cf. also Blumenberg, 1959, 1793f.).

Here we have a genuinely *religious* understanding of 'chance': anxieties of human finitude do not lead to trust in human rationality and *technè* (the classical Greek position) but to trust in God. Faith in the divine transcendent is helpful and comforting as long as the goodness and graciousness of are presupposed. 'God will not harm me', the believer confesses, even in the midst of wretchedness; 'eventually everything that happens to me will contribute to my eternal benefit.' In Christian faith, the source of 'ontological security' (Giddens) is neither the rationality of human *technè* nor reliance on the laws of nature but faith in the transcendent grace of God. *A high awareness of contingency (of 'good luck' and 'bad luck'; things that did not have to happen but unfortunately did) is combined with a strong religious intensity* Trusting Providence is having faith in the laws of nature but having faith in the goodness of the Creator God, who will also be the Redeemer.

I elaborate on this point simply to underscore the fact that – contrary to the reflex of the young people in our project – a religious scheme of interpretation can well be combined with a high sense of contingency. One can even go further: only *because* of a strong belief in the goodness of God, the radical contingency and finiteness of human life can be professed.

4. It is precisely this fragile religiosity that began to erode in modern times. In the late Middle Ages, nominalism raised philosophical doubts regarding God's necessity. How could the freedom of God be defended if He could not have decided otherwise than He did? God had to be contingent too; otherwise He could not be sovereign. Slowly, the metaphysical foundation of the Christian worldview lost its trustworthiness. Where might a reliable and unshakable necessity be found in this universe?

In the modern, scientific outlook God and creation changed places: God became contingent and nature and rationality took the place of necessity. If we cannot rely on God, we have to rely on ourselves, on human rationality, on the laws of nature. The modern belief in the power of human subjectivity (science, history) filled the void left by the vanishing shadow of a weakened God, according to a thesis posited by Hans Blumenberg (Blumenberg 1966).

The young people in our project no longer share the belief of modernity in the absolute human mastery of existence. They live consciously under *postmodern* conditions, given their awareness of the contingency of human existence. In postmodernity, everything is experienced as contingent, God nor nature (or the rationality of the human subject) being necessary in the scheme of things. This metaphysical condition of our human experience is not captured in its existential depth by Giddens' techniques of risk assessment. How are we to interpret the existential fact of being subject to the experience of 'good luck' and 'bad luck'? Premodern and modern outlooks do not seem of much help anymore. References to a hidden world order (*fortuna* who punishes or rewards), or to the laws of nature and human rationality in the struggle with the adversities of life do not seem convincing to this new generation. The religious understanding, apparently associated or even identified with a premodern belief in a hidden world order, is vigorously rejected.

4. Religion as the Cultivation of Contingency: Challenges for Theology

How are we to deal with the consciousness of radical contingency within the postmodern condition? That is the question I want to pose, without being able to give a satisfactory answer. Nevertheless, in this concluding section I want to offer a few observations that might invite theologians to open the dialogue with the coming generations of the 21st century. First, I want to question the modern conceptualization of religion and religious coping as *Kontingenzbewältigung*, and then I will argue for a rethinking of the concept of radical transcendence.

1. In modern understandings of religion, religion is usually interpreted as an attempt to *master* contingency. Since the sociologist H. Lübbe first talked in 1974 of religion as *Kontingenzbewältigung*, the concept has become a broadly shared theorem in the sociology of religion and anthropology used by theorists such as Luckmann, Berger, Luhmann and Habermas. (Dalferth and Stoellger, 2000, p. 16) This interpretation does not only lead to a functionalist reduction of religion but also represents a typical *modern* disfigurement of the nature of religiosity.

As described above, modernity is a cultural enterprise of searching for a strategy that fights contingency by means of human subjectivity. An interpretation of religion as the attempt of the human subject to 'cope' with the fateful moments in life fits neatly into this line of thinking. Religious representations, rituals, and practices function as compensatory and reassuring instruments that help exorcise the anxieties of the unknown and uncontrollable. Religious systems and church organizations create a sacred order in the chaos of experience; they offer an otherworldly meaning even to that what is meaningless in this world. The death of a beloved one or one's own incurable illness – they do not make sense apparently but God (and on his behalf, mediated by the confession, the church, the priest, the real believer, etc.) has a hidden plan or purpose with its own rationality that is supposed to rule the

world providentially. In this perspective, religion becomes a functional technique for controlling *tuchè*, as in ancient philosophy.

However, rather than viewing it as *Kontingenzbewältigung*, with the accent on *bewältigung*, it may be better to view religion – the Christian religion at least – as a *culture of cultivation of contingency* (Dalferth and Stoellger, 2000, p. 18ff). The Protestant tradition especially cultivated the experience of the facticity of life by symbolizing contingent experiences as a ‘gift’ or as ‘grace’ of God. This means that in religious practice events are not causally explained as meaningful elements in a hidden world order nor reduced with respect to their existential hardship. The facts are acknowledged, not in order to ‘cope’ with them but to give them a humane expression in, for example, a hymn, a prayer, a lament or thanksgiving. ‘God’ is experienced not in the restored coherence and continuity of the trajectory of life but precisely in its interruptions. God does not stand for controlled order but, on the contrary, he reveals himself in the experience of the *Unterbrechung*, the interruption of this order.

This experience of transcendence is rooted in a pre-theoretical, and irreducibly religious experience (cf. Schleiermacher’s *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*). It can easily be suffocated when it becomes systematized in confessional or theological systems of meaning. The early dialectical theology of Karl Barth and others can be seen as an attempt to restore this genuine religious impulse. An exploration of the category of *intercession*, ‘coming-in-between’ as the human experience of the divine, within Christian tradition is perhaps a promising way to warrant this religious root experience (cf. van der Kooi, 2006, p. 75-87).

In my view, the postmodern experience of chance as (good and bad) ‘luck’ should not be ‘interpreted away’ by integrating it into traditional theological schemes of understanding. The role of theology should be different: theology should stimulate the cultivation of the experience of luck and offer concepts and practices to bring those experiences to religious expression.

2. But what does ‘religious’ mean in this respect? There is another important theological category that should be safeguarded from its fateful journey in modernity. Genuine religiosity implies the irreducible experience of *transcendence*, understood as a process of experiencing the totally other, for which any human category is inadequate. The concept (although only a ‘concept’) is crucial in preventing religious experience from being reduced to ‘nothing but’ a psychological or social phenomenon and theology from ending up as anthropology.

Under modern conditions, the concept of transcendence is used as the opposite of immanence, which refers to the world of human experience. 17th-century modernist scientists introduced this ‘contrastive understanding of transcendence’ (Kathryn Tanner, 2001, p.2f.). Because of that, the transcendent God became synonymous with an otherworldly, incomprehensible entity not involved in human affairs, in contrast to the immanent world ruled by its own homogeneous laws of nature that had to be discovered by natural science. ‘Since they did not want to think of God as utterly beyond their comprehension, they thought of God’s otherness in terms of distance and remoteness from the world. Though they did not use the terms, they were, in effect, contrasting *transcendence* with *immanence*. Such a “contrastive” account of transcendence ... makes divine transcendence and involvement in the world into a zero-sum game: the more involved or immanent, the less

transcendent, and vice versa' (Placher, 1996, p. 111). The experience that God was not one of the 'things' in the world to be analysed and compared with categories appropriate to the other 'things' in the world disappeared.. As William C. Placher writes, modernity 'domesticated' the transcending experience of total otherness, by locating God's transcendence in an upper world behind or above ours, thereby preventing Him from interfering with the laws of this world. The transgressing experience of leaving oneself behind, reaching out to the more-than-human (transcendence from within) and the experience of being overwhelmed by powers greater than us (transcendence from without) (for this distinction, see Ganzevoort, 2003) are no longer expressed in terms of genuine religious rhetoric.

In order to use God language again for this experience of transcendence, the static 'two world metaphysics' of supernaturalism must be rejected.

Transcendence is a process, not a substance. Instead of the vertical, static transcendence (the divine beyond this world) of supernaturalism, transcendence has to be interpreted more *horizontally* and dynamically: the totally o/Other is present within the life world of human experience.

This line of thinking is philosophically still in its beginning phases (cf. Ferry, 2002; Kunneman, 2005). I think, however, that it promises to be a fruitful way of re-evaluating religion. For it takes as its starting point the context of the experience of the young people of our research population. It should begin with an authentic phenomenological description of their life world and the awareness they express that sometimes 'something happens' in the immanence of our daily life world (*Lebenswelt*), Sometimes something happens that interrupts our complex technological environment and our dense network of human relationships, and transcends the categories of human subjectivity.

Is it simply 'good luck', 'bad luck' – as our young respondents say? What if we re-use ancient God language in order to develop a richer, more cultivated vocabulary?

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<http://www.ruardganzevoort.nl/a03const.htm>