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# THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM: ELEMENTS FOR A THEOLOGY OF CARE

## ABSTRACT

This article proposes a fresh reading of the Heidelberg Catechism from the perspective of an ethics of care, a new paradigm of doing ethics, strongly influenced by feminist philosophy. In its anthropology, this approach in ethics emphasizes human relationality, mutual dependency and vulnerability. Though there are strong affinities with theological anthropology, the ethics of care still lacks a theological framework. The thesis argued here, is that the Heidelberg Catechism offers essential elements for a “theology of care”. It describes 1. God as a caring, ‘mothering’ God; 2. human beings as having care as their essence and divine vocation; and 3. the relationship between God and human beings as a relationship of mutual care. The care perspective in the Heidelberg Catechism is limited, however, because it does not give a full account of the open endedness of the relationship between God and humanity.

## 1. THE GOD OF THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

In the Netherlands, the Heidelberg Catechism became recently well known again by an author who pleaded for a definitive farewell to it. Maarten 't Hart, raised in an orthodox Reformed milieu in Maassluis, took leave of his faith in God with his bestselling novel *Een vlucht regenwulpen* (1978; transl. 1986 as *A flight of curlews*). The novel has as its motto:

Lord's Day 10, article 27: What do you understand by the providence of God?

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The almighty, everywhere-present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

The novel depicts Maarten's youth in Maassluis. It can be read as an homage to his mother, who dies after a long suffering from throat cancer. A crucial scene in the book is the visit of two elders from the congregation, who rebuke his mother for her sinful state in the nearness of death. Her son Maarten attacks the two men physically and chases them out of the house. Outside, he realizes what he has been doing.

I am certain now, with the definitive certainty where the Calvinists always talk about, that Christianity is a sham, yes that the whole life is a vile lie, and that somewhere in the universe a god is satanically laughing about my grief, the god of Lord's Day 10, who's fatherly hand sent my mother a sickness, a pretaste of her suffering in hell. That is how god is, the god of the HC, the god who hates people so intensely that he invented throat cancer for them. Even human beings are not capable to kill each other in such a wicked way as god can do with such an illness ('t Hart 1978: 79, my translation).

The novel – one million copies sold and made into a successful movie in 1981<sup>1</sup> – has had an enormous impact on the post war baby boom generation, and confirmed many in their farewell to Christian faith. It led also Dutch Reformed theologians as Herman Wiersinga to their criticism of the HC and the “sadistic” God (Sölle 1973:20) of Providence, who sends suffering to the innocent. The image of God in the HC, Wiersinga says, needs to be christologically reconstructed: God is not the cosmic power behind the suffering, he is sympathetic in the suffering, fighting against it. (Wiersinga 1975:19, 66; Wiersinga 1992:52).

I am not going into the theological strategy chosen by many theologians, since then, confronted with the question of theodicy after Auschwitz, in their option for a radical theology of the cross. A Christological concentration and reduction of the doctrine of providence may answer some questions, but raise new ones as well. The theological concept of a crucified God cannot silence the voices of the sufferers who are searching for meaning and cry for justice. However, I do not want to go into that dogmatic question. As an ethicist, working in the field of health care and social work, I would like to propose a fresh reading of the HC from the

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1 <http://www.letterenfonds.nl/nl/boek/690/een-vlucht-regenwulpen>

perspective of an ethics of care. The term stand for an approach in ethics I feel sympathetic with, but which still lacks a theological framework. I think, that's at least the intuition I want to explore, that the HC offers essential elements for a theology of care.

## 2. "WE ARE CARE" (L. BOFF)

A few words on the ethics of care. Though there are strong affinities between a theology of love (the so called agapistic tradition) and the ethics of care (Groenhout 2003:17ff.) we are still waiting for a more developed theology of care that takes up and incorporates the insights and impulses of the ethics of care as it was developed by feminist authors since the 1980s. There is a long tradition in practical theology focusing on pastoral care as an ecclesial practice. Guiding authors in this field like Elaine L. Graham also integrated explicitly women's experience into her outline for a "Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty" (Graham 1996, especially 172ff.). The focus of her pastoral theology, however, is the pastoral *practice*, understood as "a diversity of activities on the part of the faith-community" (Graham 1996, 96, cf. 7). A full theology of care, however, would have to start and end with care, not as an element of dimension of human or Christian praxis, but as its core and essence.<sup>2</sup>

The ethics of care aims more than just an applied ethics for the health care sector. It presents itself as a new paradigm of doing ethics, a fundamental understanding of human life and of living together. An ethics of care approach understands care as the most essential characteristic of being in the world. With Martin Heidegger, care should not be considered a phenomenon among others, but as an *Existential*, a fundamental mode of being. (Heidegger 2004: 238) "We do not *have* care. *We are* care." (Boff 2007: 56) A theology of care that adopts this view, and understands care as the Alpha and Omega of human life in relationship with God, aims at a reframing<sup>3</sup> of doing theology, a specific way of talking about God and God's relation to the world.

Reading the HC from the perspective of a theology of care, one reads another narrative of God in the HC than Maarten 't Hart did in his novel. God is depicted as a caring God, and the dramatic relationship between

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2 There is reference to or discussion of the ethics of care in Graham 1996.

3 "To 'reframe' means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experience and to place it in another frame which fits the 'facts' of the same concrete situation equally or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning." (Stewart D. Govig, cited by Swinton 2007:15-16).

God and humanity displays itself as a relationship of mutual care. A “god who hates human beings so intensely that he invented throat cancer for them” (t Hart 1978: 79) can’t be found in the text of the HC.

Let us explore what the HC might contribute to the development of a theology of care. I start with some remarks on an ethics and a theology of care, before I come to the HC itself.

A theology of care may take its starting point in the ethics of care, as developed since the 1980’s especially by feminist philosophers.<sup>4</sup> The ethics of care’s conception of “care” is not limited to the formal practices of institutional health care, but offers a comprehensive perspective on the human condition. Care, and not for example work (purposive action and control), or thinking (rationality), is what makes humans primarily human. I care, therefore I am. (Boff 2007:68) Or even better, because every human being is a mother’s child: I am being cared for, therefore I am. Care has a double aspect, it entails attitude as well as action. Care stands for being devoted to someone or something, attention, being committed (to care about). This attitude leads to taking responsibility, being concerned by doing something (to care for, and take care of).<sup>5</sup> As the liberation theologian Leonard Boff – as far as I can see the only one who put some steps on the road to a theology of care – writes:

Care always accompanies the human being because the human being will never stop loving and devoting itself to someone (first sense), nor will the human being stop preoccupying and concerning itself for the loved one (second sense) (Boff 2007:59).

Boff formulates the basic intuition of an ethic, or a theology of care approach as follows:

To care is at the very root of the human being; it is there before anyone does anything. And if someone does do anything it is always accompanied by, and permeated with, a caring attitude (Boff 2007:15).

Taking this stance results in a specific anthropology, but also leads us to a specific theology. Boff asks

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4 Held (2006: 26), locates the beginnings of the ethics of care with a pioneering essay called “Maternal Thinking” by philosopher Sara Ruddick published in 1980. Important figures to be mentioned, among others, are also Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, Eva Feder Kittay, Joan Tronto.

5 Leonardo Boff, *Essential Care. An Ethics of Human Nature*. London: SPCK 2007, 58.

what kind of image of the human being do we project when we discover the human being as a being-in-the-world-with-others always in relation, building his habitat, occupied with things, concerned with people, willing to suffer with and be happy with those to whom he feels united and whom he loves? The most adequate answer to this question will be: the human being is a being that takes care; moreover, his essence is found in caring. To have an attitude of care towards all he plans and does is the essential characteristic of the human being (Boff 2007:17).

What happens to theology when it is entirely re-thought from the paradigm of care? When it takes care as its “root metaphor”?<sup>6</sup> Leonardo Boff makes at least a start with it. He takes up Heidegger’s intuition that care is “the basic constitutive phenomenon of human existence, and the clue to its interpretation.”(Heidegger 2004:238) But perhaps surprisingly, instead of offering a philosophical reconstruction of Heidegger’s *Existentialanalyse*, he tells a story: the fable-myth of Hyginus, a first Century freed slave, that inspired also Heidegger to his *Being and Time*.

Once when Care was crossing a river, she saw some clay; she thoughtfully took up a piece and began to shape it. While she was meditating on what she had made, Jupiter [the heavens] came by. Care asked him to give it spirit, and this he gladly granted. But when she wanted her name to be bestowed upon it, he forbade this, and demanded that it be given his name instead. While Care and Jupiter were disputing, Earth arose and desired that her own name be conferred on the creature, since she had furnished it with part of her body. They asked Saturn [History/ Time] to be their arbiter, and he made the following decision, which seemed a just one: “Since you, Jupiter, have given its spirit, you shall receive that spirit at its death; and since you, Earth, have given its body, you shall receive its body. But since Care first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives. And because there is now a dispute among you as to its name, let it be called *homo*, for it is made out of *humus* (earth) (Heidegger 2004:242).

Taken from the Earth below, living with the Heavens above, moving forward in Time, the human soul belongs to Care, to *Cura*, who “holds” him for as long as he lives (*Cura teneat, quamdiu vixerit*). (Boff 2007: 21f.)

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6 The American philosopher Stephen Pepper (1967:3) defined *root metaphor* as “an area of empirical observation which is the point of origin for a world hypothesis.”

Without care, the human being would only exist as a lump of clay in the banks of a river, or live as a disembodied angelic spirit outside historic time (Boff 2007:69).

The myth of Hyginus reminds Genesis.<sup>7</sup> The breath of life, breathed by the Spirit of God into the nostrils and turning Adam into a living being, (Genesis 2:7) is personified in the myth by Cura, Care. Care makes human beings really human. Boff, however, is reluctant when it comes to biblical theology, though he describes the God of Jesus as a compassionate “Father with the characteristics of a Mother” (Boff 2007:91), and refers to Jesus of Nazareth as “a being of care” (Boff 2007:121).<sup>8</sup> Despite these references, Boff does not explore the theological consequences of these biblical observations. So how a theology inspired by the Scriptures will look like, when God is personified as Cura, a caring divinity?

### 3. ELEMENTS OF AN ETHICS OF CARE IN THE HC

The HC, is my thesis, offers some central, albeit limited, insights for such a theology of care. It describes 1. God as a caring, “mothering” God; 2. human beings as having care as their essence and divine vocation; and 3. the relationship between God and human beings as a relationship of mutual care. The care perspective in the HC is limited, because – as I want to argue at the end of my paper – it does not give a full account of the open endedness of the relationship between God and humanity.

Let us start with the relationship between God and human beings as a relationship of mutual care. A theology of care, following the ethics of care, describes human beings, against the liberal Enlightenment view of the separated, autonomous self, as fundamentally *connected* (*interdependent*) (Pettersen 2008: 10f.) “I am not naturally alone. I am naturally in an relation from which I derive nourishment and guidance,” as Nel Noddings, one of the early founders of the ethics of care writes.

When I am alone, either because I have detached myself or because circumstances have wrenched me free, I seek first and most naturally to reestablish my relatedness. My very individuality is defined in a set of relations. This is my basic reality (Noddings 1984:51).

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7 Though Heidegger’s use of this fable in casting the female *Cura* as creator has been seen as a gendered inversion of the creation story of Genesis, in which woman is created last. Cf. Froese 2006:188.

8 “In Hyginus, Care is not seen as a deity, rather it is seen as a personification of a fundamental way-of-being.” (Boff 2007: 56)

Correspondingly, in the HC also the language of relationality prevails. God is the loving Father, who maintains a dramatic care relationship with his children. The main question in the HC is not, as Eberhard Busch pointed out against Otto Weber, anthropology; it's concern is not a description of the subjective, inner process of salvation, but the work done to us by the triune God, for us and with us) (Busch 1998:16,19,21,23). It's basic theme is the free God and the free human being. (Busch 1998:24) Right from the start ( Lord's Day [LD] 1.1.), we are considered to belong to Jesus Christ, not in the sense of being possessed by an owner, but like a child belonging to its parents, a beloved to his or her lover. And "no creature shall separate us from His love." (LD 10.28)

The HC defends a *relational ontology*, long before Enlightenment thinking found it necessary to take leave of it, replacing it by individual autonomy. A care relationship is an open, dynamic process. It has a hopeful scenario, in which the one who cares intends to contribute to the strength for life of the one cared for, enhance the power to live a life of one's own. A care relationship, at the same time, has a dramatic structure; it entails a going through good and bad times together. This is precisely how in the HC the three parts on "Man's misery", "Man's salvation" and "Thankfulness" function: as three moments in the ongoing care relationship of God and humanity. They should not be read as subsequent phases in time, but as always present dimensions in one relational drama. A specific anthropology follows: a human being has to be "defined" as the narrative of the life trajectory of someone who belongs and has been entrusted to the care of someone else or others. There is no essentialist definition possible of human beings as such, *an und für sich*. One cannot look at people, without bearing in mind that they are involved in a (love) story with God. (cf. Busch 1998:41,127)

Though the majesty of God is broadly painted out in the HC, the aim of the salvation process is not subjection, but a living together in the reciprocity of love, in order that a human being "might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify Him" (LD 3. 6) We might even speak of a mystic tenor in the HC – though in a limited sense, see my final conclusion – the goal of salvation is a dwelling together in freedom and mutuality of Lover and Beloved (Busch 1998:252)

God is the One-Who-Cares; we are the ones Cared-for. Even when God is the almighty Creator, he has a particular, private relationship with me: he is (not only mine, but also) *my* father. In his concern, I am *special*.

The HC employs a personal vocabulary and values – another important element for which the ethics of care (re)opens up our eyes

(Held 2006:9-13) – and highlights the role of *emotions* in the relationship between God and human beings. “Comfort” is the accolade which embraces the whole of the HC, but also fear, anguish pain and terrors (LD 16.44), sorrows and joy, cheerfulness are part of the divine-human drama (LD 19.52; 21.55;22.58) The HC cares for the whole human being, his body and soul.

As in the ethics of care, in the HC the neediness and finiteness of the *human body* is explicitly acknowledged as the object of divine and human care. A theology of care also needs to be, as the HC presents itself is, down to earth. Humans are creatures of flesh and blood, with vital needs to be satisfied by “care and labour” (LD 50.125). Food, shelter, health, intimacy; the HC shows human beings as needy creatures, with a soul wanting for redemption and a fragile, vulnerable body, dependent on the “herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty” – in short, the incalculable contingency of the fragile biosphere in which he takes part. (LD 10. 27) God does not only take care of eternal salvation, but also cares for “all things necessary” (Nooddruft’ in the Dutch translation) of one’s own and other’s body. (LD 9.26, cf. 42. 111; 50.125; 45.118;46.121, cf. Busch 1998:125). That the human body is finite and *mortal*, so evident in the context of physical health care, goes also without saying in the HC. It speaks about the comfort in life and death - with an emphasis on death. If our Savior does not intervene, we have to be prepared for the total destruction of our existence at the end of our life (LD 4.11 compared with 22.57, 58).

The HC also strongly emphasizes the *dependency* of the human being in its care relationship with God. Dependency is also a strong element in the ethics of care, in resistance to the liberal ideology of self-sufficiency (Held 2006). *Gód* is the primordial One-Who-Cares; we are the Cared-for, the HC claims. How we flourish, depends on the care given to us. In the HC, God as our Creator is the presupposition of our existence. He is our Alpha and Omega. Having faith in God the Creator means to acknowledge that I am not my own origin.<sup>9</sup> Sin alienates us from our origin. Having faith in God as my Savior (LD 5-7, 11-19) expresses in an even stronger sense our dependency on God’s justification.

In the HC, the relationship between God and humanity is a hierarchical one. God is the heavenly Father, who redeems and preserves his children (by adoption, LD 13.33) from evil (LD 1.1). This does not mean however, that the believer is only considered a passive object of divine care. The redeemed and thankful sinner is a free human being, expecting “all

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9 “Ich entspringe nicht mir selbst” (Busch 1998: 120)



good from God only, and love, fear, and honor Him with my whole heart” (LD 34.94, First Commandment).

Only 9 articles in the HC concern “Man’s misery”, 74 are about his redemption and 26 are dedicated to his thankfulness. But it cannot be denied that the relationship between the majestic God and the – we have to admit - “courageous” (Barth 1947:21) acting human being is a one-sided relationship of dependency. We are dependent on “the will of my Father in heaven” (LD 1.1.) “my faithful Father” (LD 9.26), “his fatherly hand” (LD 10.27), “our faithful God and Father” (LD10.28). The sovereignty of this father-God is so clear, that discerning elements of anthropocentrism in the HC is a clear misreading (Barth 1947:19).

The care relationship between Father and “child” (cf. LD 13.33) is – as any care relationship is, at least in the beginning – depicted in the HC as strongly *asymmetric*. The triune God is the one who cares, we are the ones being cared for. This is evident for God as our Creator, but even more in the redemptive work in Jesus Christ, the Son. (LD 5-19; cf. 1.1 “his precious blood”). It can be read as an act of God’s self sacrifice out of love for his creation. The justification is an ultimate act of care: God is giving his beloved life for our’s.

I shall not go into an evaluation of the role Anselmian satisfaction doctrine plays in the HC vision on atonement. But with the outcomes of recent discussions in mind within the ethics of care, about the relationship between justice and care, the emphasis put by the HC on God’s *justice* might be understood not as a strange element in, but as an intrinsic part of the dynamic care relationship between God and humanity. Justice, understood *within* the framework of the care paradigm, is not its opposite. “God is indeed merciful, but He is *likewise* just”, the HC states in its introduction of the Second Part on Man’s Redemption (*italics mine*). What does “likewise” mean in this context? When one starts to think from the perspective of justice, understood as rational impartiality, care – seen as emotional preference, neglecting or refusing impartiality – is a spoilsport. In a modern theory of justice, care is a strange element. Often justice and care are played off against each other as rational against emotional, public against private. In case of conflict, justice prevails (cf. Pettersen 2008:85-112) “Care” is a nice mother, who only can say to her rebellious children: Just wait until father gets home”(Claassens 2004:11f.). “Justice” then, is the father, restoring order. In the perspective of an ethics of care, however, care gets priority, and justice is part of the care process (Johnson 1993:181-185).

Arguing against the sentimentalization of care, however, it is right to emphasize that disciplining and punishment are not strange elements in,

but belong to the heart of care. Care also hurts. Likewise, in the HC, God's mercy expresses itself in his justice (LD 4.11), and vice versa. Within the logic of its development and structure, the satisfaction doctrine can be seen as a – necessary – part of the dynamics of the care relationship which God maintains with humanity; it is not its essence, nor its final word. Its essence is God's self sacrificing care in Jesus Christ.

#### 4. CARING CREATURES

In the HC, corresponding to the divine care in creation and redemption, human beings, created in the image of God, are considered to *embody* care. In an elementary sense, as beings who worry about their daily bread, they have to satisfy their basic needs by “care and labour” (LD 50.125). But also as social beings who are called to care about and take care of others. In its interpretation of the Second Table of the Law, the HC defends a deliberate – if one is allowed to say anachronistically – non-liberal agapist *ethics* of care. It is not the harm principle that rules the relationships between citizens of the common wealth, but neighbour love.

The fifth commandment calls children to “show honour, love, and faithfulness to their parents” but also to “bear patiently with their infirmities” (LD 39.104); the sixth commandment “You shall not murder” does not receive a negative and minimalist explanation from a non-harm perspective, but is interpreted maximally as a positive duty to take care of the neighbour. Envy, hate, anger, and desire of revenge are depicted as hidden murders (LD 40.106). To love our neighbour as ourselves, means: “to show patience, peace, meekness, mercy, and kindness toward him, and to prevent his hurt as much as possible; also, to do good even unto our enemies.”(LD 40.107) This ethos does not fit into a social contract theory which founds the relationship with the unknown other on a utilitarian *do ut des* calculation. The HC aims at a public ethos of mutual care. Those who are liberated from sin aren't calculating their thankfulness. The *do ut des* is replaced by a *do, quia mihi datum est*; I give because much has been given to me (cf. Ricoeur 1995). Therefore, the interpretation of the eighth commandment (“You shall not steal”) also receives a positive turn: where I can and may, I am supposed to further my neighbour's good (LD 42.111). Also the ninth commandment (“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour”) is maximalized into the exhortation to “defend and promote my neighbour's good name, in so far as I can” (LD 43.112).

## 5. PROVIDENCE: A MOTHERING FATHER

The HC care perspective shows itself fully in the image of a provident God, described in Lord's Day 9 and 10. "The God of Lord's Day 10" is the One who Cares and not – as in Maarten 't Hart's description – "the god who hates people so intensely that he invented throat cancer for them".

For the heavenly father of the HC is a father with motherly characteristics. As a thought experiment, one might exchange the name "Father" in the HC by "Mother". That may colour our thinking about providence quite differently. There is ample scriptural support for the use of a motherly metaphor for the God who cares, as Juliana Claassens has shown in her inspiring book on *The God who provides* (Claassens 2004; cf. also Claassens 2012:41-64). She pictures God as the "nursing Mother of the Universe", providing her children with food and life. Inspired by the work of Elisabeth Johnson, she investigates the biblical potential for female imagery for God. Claassens concludes, after exploring the Hebrew Scriptures, that "[t]o imagine the God who feeds all creation in terms of a mother who is intimately involved with her children has the effect of understanding God as caring about the most basic needs of life in our daily struggles." (Claassens 2004:40). Imagining God as Mother is helpful to criticize the patriarchal, androcentric image of God as a ruler who, indifferently and uninvolved, stands at a distance from his creation, unrelated to his creatures. The mother metaphor brings us closer to the Trinitarian thinking that prevails in the HC: God as a liberating, incarnational, passionate, relational, suffering God. A God essentially in relation, rather than an essence in itself. Our image of divine providence changes, if we no longer understand the "almighty, everywhere-present power of God", where Lord's Day 10 starts with, as the imperial power of a hierarchical, cosmic ruler, but as the power of love of a God, mothering the Universe. God's creative presence is a "primordial upwelling of the power of being and divine acts of giving life, sustaining it, and encouraging it to grow." (Johnson 1993:179) God the Mother, as Johnson writes,

freely gives life to all creatures without calculating a return, loving them inclusively, joyfully saying the basic words of affirmation, "It is good that you exist." Her creative, maternal, love is the generating matrix of the universe, matter, spirit, and embodied spirit alike. (Johnson 1993:179)

Johnson does not plead for abolishing the image of God as father, replacing it completely by the image of mother. Therefore, the father child-relationship, so dominant in the HC as in the Bible itself, is, as a basic human experience, too elementary and can also express the creativity, protection, delight and care of a caring parent, instead of the authority of a domineering patriarch (Johnson 1993: 282, note 57). Is the way

Jesus uses the Aramaic “Abba” to address God not also characterized by an “intimacy of relation between Jesus and God, along with a sense of God’s compassion over suffering, willing good in the midst of evil”? (Johnson 1993:81)<sup>10</sup>

The heavenly Father in the HC cares for his creation like a caring father motherly cares for his offspring. In order to clean the father image from misunderstanding, the voluntaristic formulation of Lord Day’s 1 that nothing happens “without the will of my Father in heaven” should better be changed into “without my (caring) Father in heaven”. Most fathers most of the time – also the 16<sup>th</sup> century fathers, I suppose - are in their relationship with their children not decision makers, but providers of care. And care implies risks.

At the same time, we have to adjust our ideas of motherly care is not romantic or sentimental. The romantic notion of motherhood is perhaps a patriarchal, male bias. The biblical image of God’s motherly care is much more realistic and balanced, and an image “of great versatility”, as Juliana Claassens notes. The God who provides food in abundance is also punishing the rebellious child, those whom she loves. God is not only a nurturing, but also a disciplining Mother. (Claassens 2004:12, referring to Numeri 11, Deut 32) The God who feeds in the biblical texts, is also the Mother who powerfully manages her household, who makes sure that each child is fed and cared for. (Claassens 2004:13, cf. Exod. 16:16)

Taking the metaphor of God as the divine personification of Care (cf. the myth of Hyginus) helps for a better understanding of divine providence, I think. The HC probably stays a bit too close in the neighbourhood of John Calvin, to make that move easily. In line with Calvin, the HC rules out all hazard and accident in its picture of God’s providence. Against the Epicureans, (“a pest with which the world has always been plagued at a distance”, Calvin, Institutes I, 16.4) who wanted, dreaming “of an inert and idle God,” cut through the link between God and his creation by abandoning creation to its own, Calvin philosophically opts for proximity with the Stoics, who let coincide God’s agency with the laws of the universe. The biblical theologian Calvin, then, argues that it is not an anonymous Logos, but the loving triune God that rules the universe as a heavenly Father.

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10 Johnson (1993:150) also quotes Anselm of Canterbury, the theologian who designed the satisfaction doctrine, for so many the stumbling block in the HC. Anselm prays: “But you too, good Jesus, are you not also a mother? Are you not a mother who likes a hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings?”

In the image of the Father, however, the image of an imperial ruler still seems to shine through. To Calvin, God represents “the disposer and ruler of all things”, who

from the remotest eternity, according to his own wisdom, [he] decreed what he was to do, and now by his power executes what he decreed (Institutes I, 16.8).

Would Calvin have been thinking differently about God’s fatherly providence, if he only had seen a caring mother before him instead of a imperial ruler?

I don’t know whether such a reframing of providential care by imagining God as heavenly Mother would reassure and convince novelist Maarten ‘t Hart. Whatever metaphor we take for the divine, the question of the theodicy remains an insolvable aporia, which cannot be answered intellectually, only be encountered practically (Swinton 2007). There is no philosophical or dogmatic solution to the question how to reconcile the belief in a loving God with the reality of evil. We have learn to live with unanswered questions.<sup>11</sup>

But thinking the relation of God to his creation from a theology of care perspective, creates an open eye for the reality of tragic suffering and moral evil in the world. At the origin of God’s providence lies creative love, not a decreeing will. The relational paradigm of care would have to take leave from the traces of *voluntaristic individualism* still present in Calvin and the HC, culminating in the unbiblical “the will of my Father” (LD 1.1). The presence of tragic suffering in the world is not the result of a divine decision, but remains a possibility within the care relationship of God and humanity. A mother does not have her children “on a string”. In the same way, God does not control the universe deliberately into detail, but allows it to take a course on its own in the presence of his persistent and enduring love (Weil 2002). Love is per definition a risky affair, and therefore always *suffering* love. To love requires fragility and vulnerability. Who enters a care relationship starts a dynamic, open-ended story.

As Swinton writes, love is intrinsically tragic.

It requires an opening up to the other in a way that inevitably makes the lover vulnerable and open to being either loved or broken. The world was created out of love and for love. Creation is fragile because it is underpinned by divine love. Which is both

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11 With Swinton (2007:68) I think, the problem of evil deserves a reframing as well; from a philosophical dilemma into a relational task. “How can we discover ways of enabling people to retain meaning and hope in the providential goodness of God *despite* the presence of evil?”

powerful and inevitable fragile. Humans beings are fragile because they are made in the image of the triune God who *is* suffering love (Swinton 2007:65-66).

Again, this is not a justification of suffering in the world. Suffering gets evil, when, as in 't Harts novel Maarten's mother's throat cancer, it withholds us from faith in God's goodness. I think, the theology of the HC here touches upon its limits. The HC creates little room for the experience of aporia, and for the praxis of lament as an adequate response to the presence of evil. It does not allow the sincere believer to hold God accountable, as the biblical figure Job did in the book named after him. There is, in the HC, no legitimate place for the doubt, "that whatever evil He sends upon me in this valley of tears, He will turn to my good". (LD 9. 26) The doctrine of providence in the HC lacks the open endedness in the drama of the care relationship between God and humanity.

## 6. CARE: AN OPEN ENDED PROCESS

Perhaps here the strong asymmetry in the relationship between God and humanity becomes painfully concrete in its consequences. In the HC, God as the One-Who-Cares sets the rules for the relationship with humanity as the One-Cared-for. But every care relationship is open, risky, unpredictable in its course and outcome. This thought however, seems a thought too many for the HC. Its Carer stays a Ruler. Sure, Eberhard Busch is right in pointing out that the HC deals with the free God and free humanity. In the articles on Prayer, Busch even discerns the humanity "come to age", *der mündige Mensch*, invited by God to participate in his interests (Busch 1998:272,278). He quotes Hendrikus Berkhof who once wrote that the most important fruit of the Holy Spirit is "that he opens up our mouth" (Busch 1998:272). "Speaking together with God", "Mitsprache bei Gott" is Busch' wonderful title above his section on articles 122-124. But how much room is left in the HC for "speaking against"? For keeping silence, cursing one's birthday, crying in anger to God?

As I said, a care relationship by definition is an open ended process, which is only successful (that means: can be characterized after all as "care") when the one-cared-for takes an active and affirmative stance in it. In her seminal book on the ethics of care, Joan Tronto (1992:105-108) distinguishes four ethical elements in the dynamics of care: Three of them concern the care giver. Attentiveness (to care about); responsibility (to care for); competence (taking care of); the fourth, however, responsiveness (receiving care) refers to the "responsiveness of the care receiver to the care". Care is not the result of individual agency, but is a relational process

in which the receiving attitude of the one cared for is an essential element, without which a care relationship cannot continue. Precisely this element returns in the HC in the third part on Thankfulness, on Ethics and Prayer. The relationship between God and humanity in the First and Second Part is dominated by dependency, in the Third Part it is characterized by reciprocity and mutuality.

*Recognition* is essential for a care relationship, Nel Noddings, one of the mothers of the ethics of care, writes.

The cared for is free to be more fully himself in the caring relation. Indeed, this being himself, this willing and unselfconscious revealing of self, is his major contribution to the relation (Noddings 1984: 73).

Noddings writes about parents and children, but she could have written about us in relation to God. Our coming of age, our *Mündigkeit* is our contribution to God's care for us. Of course, even when we would reject God's care, God's care still counts as care. But it would have missed its aim. Care is a dynamic circle. It needs the recognition, the responsiveness of the one cared for, in order to become full. "Caring involves two parties: the one-caring and the cared-for. It is complete when it is fulfilled in both." (Noddings 1984:68) Even without our thankful response, God remains the "ethical hero." But his care project would have failed (cf. Noddings 1984:77f). Care implies communion.

It seems however, that the HC does not want to go that far. It keeps considering us as children fed by our heavenly Father; we'll never become his intimate friends or free and easy lovers. Though there is a mystic tone in the HC, the distance between the Lover and Beloved is kept. As the caring relationship develops, it stays characterized by hierarchy and asymmetry.

## 7. CARING FOR GOD?

I think a theology of care must dare to advance one step further, invited and challenged by the insights and implications of its paradigm. The goal of any caring relationship is *maturity*, in which – as a teacher-student relationship shows in an exemplary way – the one cared for learns to stand on his or her own feet. "Maturity" wants to say: their relationship is no longer based on a basic need, but on mutual friendship, a balanced reciprocity. (Noddings 1984:67,71; cf. Pettersen 2008:131) As Milton Mayeroff writes: "To care for another person, in the most significant sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself"(Quoted by Noddings 1984:9).

Over time, the relationship becomes one of *mutual interdependency*. It is no longer based on vital needs, but on the search for each other's good. Altruism and self sacrifice only represent one foregoing moment in a reciprocal relationship over time. In the end, symmetry is the internal *telos* of every care relationship.

A genuine care relationship moves from mothering to mutuality and to maturity. This also applies for God and humanity. Jesus said to his disciples "I do not call you slaves any longer ... but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). What does that mean theologically? Perhaps this: not only that God cares for us, and we care for ourselves and others, but that we also should care for and take care of God. That God also is vulnerable and dependent on love, seeking our love. That God not only takes responsibility for us, but that we become also responsible for God. These are impossible, even blasphemous thoughts, perhaps in the spiritual context of the HC. But it seems to me a legitimate, mystic implication of the care paradigm, to be thought through.

I'll end with a quotation of someone who moved freely along this line of thought. Etty Hillesum, a 27 year old Jewish woman, living in Amsterdam during the Second World War, confident in God's love despite the advancing of evil, wrote in her diary on July 12, 1942, before she was deported to the concentration camps:

I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much You Yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold You responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last (Hillesum 2002: 488f).

I conclude: the HC offers important element for a theology of care. It depicts the relationship between God and human beings as a dynamic and dramatic relationship, in which God is mainly the One Caring and humanity the Cared for. Though the image of God as a Father is dominant, its connotations are motherly. Created in the image of this God we cannot but care for others, for God's creation and for ourselves. The radical thought, however, that we also should take care of God, as the risky part of mature reciprocity in the care relationship, is perhaps one thought too many for the HC.



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