

# The Theology of Johannes von Hofmann

Colleagues,

*[Update: Only one new dew-drop on the Manipur fleece this week. Squeezed out it now totals 4K. Still a fair tad to go to get to 70.]* This week's posting, a book review by Mark Mattes on the theology of von Hofmann, is a bit more egg-heady than some postings in the past—and will be cherished by readers who cherish this sort of thing. I'm one of that crowd. I was a student at the same university where von Hofmann taught, where his heritage persisted. 'Course, I came along almost a century after he was gone.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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***The Self-Giving God and Salvation History: The Trinitarian Theology of Johannes von Hofmann.***

***By Matthew L. Becker. New York: T & T Clark, 2004.***

***287 pp. Paperback.***

***\$39.95. [Amazon price \$35.21]***

*A book review by Mark Mattes.*

*No less than Karl Barth judged Johannes von Hofmann (1810-1877) to be the greatest conservative theologian of the nineteenth century. In this masterful study, Matthew L. Becker (theology professor at Valparaiso University) underscores Hofmann's*

theological genius. He makes the case that Hofmann is to be appreciated in specific ways. Hofmann was (1) a leader in the emerging historical consciousness of the nineteenth century, (2) a careful researcher of Luther's theology, (3) a critic of Schleiermacher's "subjectivistic" methodology, and (4) an appropriator of the doctrine of the Trinity as a fruitful framework for accentuating the communion of the Christian with God.

Indeed, this latter creative thrust of Hofmann's makes him worthy of the utmost attention for contemporary retrievals of the doctrine of the Trinity, which are indebted to the thinking of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jüngel, Robert Jenson, and many others. Becker notes that Hofmann's Trinitarian "view of God is grounded in the divine love, which is the cause of God's free decision to self-differentiate God's self in history and give God's self (divine kenosis or 'divine self-emptying') in history in order to realize in the human Jesus a new humanity" (xix).

Becker seeks to correct Franz Pieper's misunderstandings of Hofmann as an "Ich-theologe" [= theologian focusing on the Christian self]. Becker is forceful: Hofmann is not an Ich-theologe but the most important Trinitarian theologian of the last 200 years (xx). Far from being solipsistic in method, Hofmann appealed to a Christian "Tatbestand," the present factual situation of the Christian. This Christian Tatbestand is always mediated in history, culture, and language. The self of the Christian is thoroughly interpreted from the scriptures. This self is also deeply committed to the world as an arena or avenue of service.

Becker also aims to correct Pannenberg's misreading of Hofmann's view of history as "determined by a construct that completely severs 'divine history' from 'profane history'"

(xix). Well known as the inventor of the term "Heilsgeschichte" [salvation history], Hofmann sees salvation history as "not a part of world-history, but rather world-history is a part of salvation history" (xix). Hofmann is similar to Pannenberg in the supposition that history must be understood from eschatology. "History is given its unity and meaning by viewing it from its end—not from its beginning—though its end appears in the midst of history and is discernible only in faith" (xix).

Hofmann was the most important representative of the Erlangen School of theology. The Erlangen theologians emphasized baptismal regeneration, an experiential Christianity, a critical appropriation of the Lutheran Confessions, and an organic-historical view of the development of the Bible, the church, and the Confessions (9). Becker wants to gain greater publicity for Hofmann because he senses Hofmann's life-giving approach to theology that has impacted different streams of confessional Lutheranism.

The volume is composed of three parts. The first presents Hofmann's life and work and offers basic interpretations of Hofmann's theology. The second explores Hofmann's theological method, focusing especially on Hofmann's description of the object of theology, on hermeneutics, and on the rapport between Hofmann and German Idealism (Ranke, Hegel, and Schelling). The third part explores Hofmann's doctrine of God in relation to humanity. It shows Hofmann's doctrine of God as love unfolding itself in a triune way, God as embracing a world of historicity and contingency, God's self-giving as wholly kenotic (self-emptying), the future of humanity as destined for God through the church and sacraments, and the future of God as the fulfillment of creation.

If any statement of Hofmann's is apt to be known today, it is

the unfortunate sentence: "I the Christian am for me the theologian the unique material of my scholarly activity" (18). Taken alone, the phrase is misleading. This is because the Christian's *Tatbestand* [present factual situation] is always relational. One's identity is always shaped in baptism and faith by God. And, deepening this conviction is the truth that God is authoring our lives historically in the community of the church and the wider world which upholds the church. Hence, against subjectivism, Becker helpfully corrects any possible misunderstandings of the nature of individual Christian experience. "Communal and ecclesial nature of the experience dictates that the understanding of this experience be compared with and, if necessary, corrected by the understanding of the experience in Scripture and by other Christian theologians" (21). Jesus Christ is the center and focus of all history, which is itself grounded in the Trinity (23).

Theology is indeed grounded in the personal faith of the Christian. But this is itself grounded in the risen Christ, who mediates the historical relationship between God and humans (42). Theology, though rooted in personal faith, is a science, since it explores and expresses the saving action of God in the world, to the end that humans are in communion with God. Reason is no independent tool but accountable to the unique *Tatbestand* which upholds it. There are, then, no universal grounds for faith as there are for philosophy. To this reviewer, this is a serious mistake-since philosophy is deeply embedded in highly abstract, though no less mythic, forms of thinking. We never entirely escape from the parochial. Nor should we have to. It is the medium which opens greater dimension of experience and universal truth.

The Bible was the most important source for theology for Hofmann, and the key by which to understand life and the world. His most lengthy work is a multi-volume commentary on

scripture. Here he takes a position radically different from either the ultra conservatives, like Hengstenberg, or the historical critics. Hengstenberg was wrong in viewing the Bible as a law book of ahistorical doctrines. However, Rationalists too appeal, with their critical consciousness, to the claims of universal, ahistorical reason (61). Against ultra conservatives, the Bible ought not to be seen as "a infallible scientific document" (71). However, historical critics naively adopt faith in "a philosophical worldview that was itself a kind of rigid, dogmatic skepticism" (66). The answer is to understand that the inspiration of scripture is itself expressed as a historical development (72).

Ahead of his time, Hofmann applied the categories of subjectivity and historicity to God. God is as such a self-unfolding subject expressing the essence of love in history. Here the economic trinity and theological trinity are intimately related, as Barth and Rahner would later develop the teaching. God is no longer impassible. Rather, "the self-emptying that occurred in the incarnation implies a real change in God that is at odds with the classical theistic notions of God's immutability and impassibility" (179). As kenotic, in the incarnate Jesus Christ, the historical trinity "has assumed a new form of dissimilarity." "The humiliation (tapeinosis) of the son, through which the archetypal world-goal had to endure the limitations and conditions placed on human beings as a result of sin, refers to Christ's relationship to all other human beings" (190). Thus, "only with the conclusion of all history is the historical self-fulfillment of the Trinity complete..." (193).

An important concern of Becker's is Hofmann's revision of the standard Anselmic view of the atonement which teaches that God's wrath must be appeased through vicarious satisfaction. Hofmann noted that this view is inconsistent with scripture and

Luther for two reasons: (1) God is wholly self-giving love, not someone who can be bought off and (2) the law is historical and not eternal. With respect to atonement, Hofmann replaces the juridical-legalistic framework of the orthodox with the scheme of Heilsgeschichte. The law belongs to a historical dispensation and is not held inseparably from the core identity of God. God is appeased when we believe the gospel. Otherwise we will inevitably encounter divine wrath in the world.

We might think of Hofmann's genius as steering a course between fundamentalism and modernism. Indeed, he has a robust appropriation of classical Christianity through the lens of Martin Luther that avoids both Biblicism and accommodationism to modern suppositions. Hofmann simply refuses to adopt the stance that became increasingly more prominent in the nineteenth century that the world is fundamentally mechanistic and "godless." In order to uphold his position, he takes the best of German Romanticism, with its emphasis on embodiment, culture, language, and history as a counterweight to demythologizing tendencies in the nineteenth century.

Hofmann's confessionalism is to be taken with the utmost seriousness. In contrast to a rigid doctrinaire approach to the Confessions as a legal code of truth, Hofmann shows that they are refreshingly mediated through a historical consciousness. At some level, all theology is historical theology. Yet, even as historical, they shape and are shaped by a morphology faithful to the gospel that entails that they are no less authoritative for evangelical faith and life. God only speaks through history and the Confessions are valid because they accord with how the gospel is to be articulated. Theology's relevance comes only in fidelity to the gospel as promise.

Hofmann's trinitarianism, so strikingly different from the absence of trinitarian thinking in Schleiermacher, speaks to us

today. While the Trinity is not the be-all and end-all of Christian faith, it is the doctrine by which we articulate the grammar of the God of the promise and our rapport with that God. In light of the renewed emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity, Hofmann's is a voice that needs to be heard. Refreshingly, his is a genuinely Protestant voice that has great respect for the catholicity of the church but does not need to ground the church in a hierarchy that is iconic of the triune life.

Matthew Becker has done a stellar job in presenting a detailed portrait of Hofmann, who deserves to be far better known in the English-speaking world than he is. Hopefully his work will lead to renewal in Hofmann studies both in Europe and in North America.

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