An Introduction to a Theology of Material and Space

> This is all we have: the cut grass on the front lawn, the cool shade the building throws onto it, the heavy steel bars on the front doors, the sound of our shoes on the marble floor of the lobby, the smell of solder from an engineer's cubicle, the silent movement of men and women, pieces of hushed conversations drifting up from the cafeteria, a ray of sun shining through the upper windows onto a forgotten office plant.
> *the author*

As we have seen in the first part, practical theology can develop new perspectives on its own disciplinary history by looking at the buildings within which its handbooks were forged. But in the 21st century such learning processes must not start necessarily within academia. They could also emerge from the world outside that is rapidly changing and that is increasingly dominated by information technology companies and their products and services as the motors for innovation and social change. Thus I argue in this second part that practical theology can learn both from the history of *technology* laboratories as the cathedrals of the 20th and 21st century and, as we will see in the third part, from the rise of *social* laboratories, which promote an open and networked approach to the world.

Before we can dive into these areas, we need however first to substantiate why our specifically material (and architectural) perspective finds resonances within theology. This is by no means insignificant as, from a theological perspective, the increased sensibility towards the material world brings with it

a shift in method when assessing the technological changes we will be concerned with. This becomes apparent when one engages in value judgements of what constitutes beneficial and detrimental developments. Where do such values, according to which theologians judge and church officials – or even politicians, companies, and the public – act, come from? Universal human rights, Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, Catholic Social Teaching? This part of the book proposes a different route in that it first of all seeks to understand in which spaces change originates and tries to discover how the material world is dealt with in these spaces. From these discoveries emerge new theological contributions.

The word *emerge* is important, because this and the following chapters do not seek the fundamentals for a good life beyond the material realities but within them. They employ a theological method we could call utopian materialism, transcendence from immanence, or: taking incarnation as seriously as intellectually possible by seeing the potential of both the material and the social realities without prematurely integrating them into a fixed system of thought. This approach thus stands in contrast to others at the intersection of sociology and theology, but it does not stand in isolation: the practical theory of Bruno Latour with its network of human and material actors, the theorists of both dialectic and *new* materialism, and also the front figures of a spatial turn as well as a praxeological turn in theology can and will be called up to the witness box.

Moreover, there is a strand of material sensibility throughout the history of theology. In the Judaeo-Christian world this is rooted in a double movement of God towards the world; Both creation and incarnation testify to a radical engagement and a radical solidarity of God with both humans and the world of things they live in. This fundamental perspective has influenced theology enormously.

A Spatial Turn with Material Implications in Systematic Theology

As a discipline closely related to pastoral theology, systematic theology has dealt for a long time with the theoretical implications that come with the inclusion of the world around us, from Melchior Cano's *loci theologici (alieni)* to the pastoral constitution of the Second Vatican Council. More recently, the *Topological Dog-*

matics of Hans-Joachim Sander, which focuses on the importance of place – from urban areas to pilgrims' ways – but also has significant material undertones.

The preliminary positioning that Sander sets out is a de-centring of the Cartesian position, a move away from the individual self as the unshaken bastion of self-assurance and towards the acceptance of plurality and uncertainty as factors outside the self. Sander sees these outside forces with the Second Vatican Council as a *sign of the times*, which present a powerful theology of self-relativisation which "we cannot escape theologically. It is as a *locus theologicus* a source for self-relativisations which further both Christian belief and its talk about God"* (Sander 2019, p. 21).

I want to highlight two ways in which Sander addresses the problem that we cannot escape the fact that modernity shakes the foundations of our identity. The first is the turn towards places[1] which enable us to see self-relativisation not as a threat to but as a source for growth. With Michel Foucault, Sander introduces heterotopias and contrasts them to utopian spaces:

> [Heterotopias] have a different content than the utopias that were so typical for modernity. While non-places allow self-empowerment through […] exclusion, which abstract from real places and sites, real places do not allow that. They corner us with voiceless contexts, which […] can not retract to non-positionality* (ibid., p. 48).

In these places, new discoveries become possible because we cannot escape what is happening and instead simply retract to dreams of a perfect utopia. Sander argues that our discoveries in such real places are radically new. He refers to Charles Pierce's concept of abduction, which happens when a surprising fact is not explained away but, through the praxis of "musing", is allowed to take our thoughts to a new territory.[2]

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1 There is a difference between the English words *place* and *space*. Marc Augé differentiates between nondescript space and places with "identity, relation, and history"* (Augé 2012, p. 83). I base my translation of the single German word *Ort* on my own judgement as to which side of the distinction the author's intention falls.

2 Sander mentions a biblical example where something radically new changes our thought patterns: It is the Emmaus story in Luke 24:13-35.

The second way to address the shaking up of our identity concepts in modernity is for Sander the idea that nature is not only one of the main sources for such self-relativisations but also the starting point for the process of surprise → musing → abduction → a new view of God and the world. According to Sander, this is a powerful resource in the Christian discourse on creation.

> [B]elief in the creator [begins] where powerlessness lurks in the discourses about the objectivity of nature […] [. There man] is confronted with a claim to power which he can neither subjectively nor objectively evade. […][F]aith trusts in God as the way through this powerlessness […] [I]t presupposes that this powerlessness – together with God and in the face of nature – is a resource to find those abductions that resist the destructive grasp in the discourses about nature* (Sander 2019, p. 104).

Being on this earth is neither a temporary state through which we as quietly as possible transfer on our way to eternal salvation, nor is it a place we can ruthlessly dominate regardless of the consequences. We are tied to life on earth and yet at the same time we feel that there is something beyond. In the postscript at the end of this book, Sander refers to Karl Rahner and his book *Hörer des Wortes*, hearer of the word, in order to address that feeling: "The more utopian we look out into space, the more heterotopian the little blue planet looks back. In this 'more over' it becomes apparent that we cannot be content with our own place"* (ibid., p. 377).

What Sander suggests at the end of his book is a spatial re-reading of Rahner's idea that we are confronted with something that transcends our existence. Without going into the details of Sander's concept of first, second, and thirdspace, which he takes from Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja[3], it is important to note that through the confrontation with spaces, new insights open up. Sander's book reads as an invitation to discovery and, with Soja's book in hand, an intellectual and an empirical journey to places.

That idea of observation, sensibility, and abductive thinking is important for the materialistic approach in this book as well. The insight, that our engagement with the world can uncover places of self-relativisation adds to that.

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3 First space is the physical space, second space the conceived space, and third space the social space (cf. Soja 1996).

A Spatial Turn with Material Implications in Practical Theology

Practical theology itself has also cultivated a sense of place, not just as a source for theological knowledge, but also as a venue of engagement for justice. In his book *A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment*, Eric O. Jacobson wants the reader to see public space in a new light and consider his or her own engagement for the city.

Jacobson designed his book as a practical guide to make the reader rediscover the world around him- or herself, not just via auto-ethnography but from the perspective of a Christian.

> Where are you? […] You may think that the question is hardly worth asking. But since "Where are you?" was the first recorded question that God asked, let's run with it a bit. Wherever you happen to be as you read this book, you are most likely in a place that we can call a built environment. So take a second to look around before reading further. Who thought this space through, and what can you discern about their values as you interact with it? Did they value community very much? How can you tell? Were they thinking of you as a person as a resource user, or as a consumer? (Jacobson 2012, p. 11)

The engagement with the built environment is not focused on architecture, or at least not primarily. Jacobson is rather interested in public spaces between buildings in the city and how this space, through the appropriation of the public, becomes "enacted space" (ibid., p. 18).

But Jacobson is not content with a new perception of public spaces, he also contributes a specifically Christian perspective, namely that of a "geography of rest" (ibid., p. 271). In this perspective he critically looks at the commercialisation of space which legitimises the presence of human beings only in their function as consumers. "Theologically, this is somewhat problematic, because God created us as creatures with inherent worth. We are 'very good' because we are in the image of God" (ibid., p. 272).

The Judaeo-Christian concept of the Sabbath deals with this problem in a new way – with Sander we could say that at this point the process of abduction begins – by introducing the command of rest which breaks through the logic of commercialised, i.e. "busy," space.

> Practising the Sabbath teaches us two important truths. We have inherent value because God made us and declared us good. Second, our confidence comes, not from our own capabilities, but from God's faithfulness (Jacobson 2012, p. 274).

This in turn leads to a different engagement with the built environment, namely by creating places of rest, where human beings are unconditionally accepted as they are and where peace, shalom, reigns. In Sander's words, these are the heterotopias: "Places that invite us to rest and to engage with one another and with the world that surrounds us without demanding that we give something productive in return can be described as places of shalom" (ibid., p. 275).

From that Jacobson derives his demand to find a new way to build cities[4] and in particular public spaces. These spaces stand in stark contrast to the zoned environments of the car-friendly city of modern 20th century architecture.

> If our public spaces are ugly or inconvenient, we learn tacitly that our value as human beings is minimal. The kinds of environments that have been built by functional zoning also tend to contradict the lessons we learn on the Sabbath (ibid., p. 276).

While I subscribe to Jacobson's ethnographic sensibility for the built environment, I want to challenge the notion to think of space only from the point of how it relates to humans. Space as a location in the material world is more than just a place where shalom for human beings is happening. On the contrary, this human-centric approach runs the risk of missing out on the richness of both natural and built environments.

I am therefore with those theologians who argue for a material turn to complement the spatial. Such a theology does not just take space and place seriously but also their material basis. This is why I am consciously sidestepping many aspects of the spatial debate and focus on materiality.[5] At the end of this book, I will come back to spaces and places (of justice) – but with a more profound insight into the richness of the material environment within which church happens.

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4 Jacobson observes that, while the garden stood at the beginning of creation, a city stands at its fulfilment (cf. Jacobson 2012, p. 19).

5 As the reference to e.g. Inken Mädler (Mädler 2006) at the beginning of the texts suggests, this book is understood as a contribution to the material debate within theology.