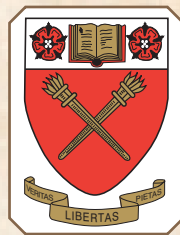


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Editor Emeritus: Rev Peter Godfrey BA, DD

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Editor

Articles, reviews and all editorial matters should be sent to the editor:

Rev Dr David Steers, 223 Upper Lisburn Road, Belfast BT10 0LL.

Tel: 02890947850

Email: nspresb@hotmail.com

Editor's Blog: <https://velvethummingbee.com/>

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Contents

<i>Pandita Ramabai: Herald of Liberty</i> 83
Margot Stevenson
<i>The Idea of Progress in Religion</i> 112
Barrie Needham
<i>How Do We Become Human?</i> 118
Esther R. Suter
<i>The ethics of transition</i>
<i>Crisis of identity and authority in Central and Eastern Europe</i> 135
Csaba Tódor
<i>Christ's fury in the Jerusalem Temple at Passover,</i>
<i>and the problem of vicarious sacrifice</i> 151
Helena Fyfe Thonemann
<i>Reviews</i>
Marcus Braybrooke, Peter B. Godfrey, Andrew M. Hill ... 157
<i>Our Contributors</i> 163

How Do We Become Human?

Lecture at the International Association for Religious Freedom – Europe Middle East Conference 2021

ESTHER R. SUTER

This Lecture describes in three parts the subject of my doctoral thesis 'Das Existenzverständnis bei Fritz Buri (1907-1995)/ The Understanding of Existence by Fritz Buri (1907-1995)'. The thesis was approved in 2020 at the Theological Faculty of Basel University.

Introduction

First some explanations for the title. When the title of this congress “Does Religion set you free?” was chosen and I was asked to contribute, very soon this question “How do we become Human?” came into my mind with an inner logic and it did not leave me. It seems so obvious that we are human that a first reaction may be surprise about this question. To be precise the title: I speak of “being humane”, becoming “humane”, because this is not naturally given. In this sense I am human if I am humane.

The question also implies a “We”: We – that means, all are meant, altogether, so it is general, universal, all humankind/humanity is meant as one human race. The “We” includes also the “I”, or me or you personally. How do I become human? We have to learn to become human, to learn to understand who we are, in a Christian understanding as made/created to the image of God, imbedded in a historical, cultural, religious or non-religious background. To be human/humane is not inherited, it may be culturally influenced and shaped, also formed by a specific religion or philosophy.

The next reflection is therefore about “human”. Coming from a German speaking background I realized one day that translating “menschlich” into English is different from the German understanding. To give an example: the Nuremberg process after the Second World War was called “Crime against Humanity” (and it was the first prosecution

of such crimes, after the UN-HR Declaration). In German it is less referred to as “gegen die Menschheit” (humanity), than as “gegen die Menschlichkeit” (humanness). What does this mean? I found out that this is still an open issue and even the question arises whether using “Menschlichkeit” (humanness) would be less strong than saying “against humanity” / Menschheit. There is a distinction in language which can be found in some Human Rights declarations. It shows, that Humanity needs communication and clarification.

If we look up “Crimes against humanity” (s. Wikipedia in English) we find many examples, whereas for “Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit” (s. German Wikipedia) only gives a few. So maybe there is also a difference in historic and in cultural interpretation. A fact which makes communication necessary.

Actually there is still the question about crimes against humanity, whether the genocide against the Armenians was merely war crimes, or was it genocide? Will USA recognize it as genocide, a definition Turkey refuses; Or in India, when people who died from Corona-19 cannot be buried but are just burnt in mass. Is this a crime against humanity? or in Venezuela and some other countries where women are killed just because they are women. Is it a crime against humanity? A new terminology comes up with “Non State Torture” I first heard in March during the virtual session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65) from involved NGOs working with women. Until now crimes against humanity were defined as crimes which are committed, supported or tolerated by governments. Yet “Non-State Torture” would mean that these are crimes, committed e.g. within the family frame or in communities.

To become human-e is probably a common ground of religions. On the other hand to be humane is not only a personal and moral decision, it is also an attitude towards a community, a society or a universal humankind, and it should be a common effort and commitment, e.g. with the Human Rights Declaration and their implementation: The aim to become more and more humane. Do we as humanity become more humane? Is there progress in becoming humane? Or are we pleased if we just can maintain a certain level of humanity/humanness?

On the personal level, I want to become human/humane, I may follow good and brilliant examples and soon I am in a religious context. “Menschlichkeit” is for me a quality, rather than an effort of being “successful” in life or seen as a moral goal. To be human, to become humane can be measured at the commitment against inhumanity. So maybe humane is the contrary of inhuman?

With this introduction to the title of our lecture on “How do we become Human?” we come close to the question “Does religion set you free?”. The link for me is that religion (or faith) is driving us to become human/e and this does set me personally free.

This introduction is the bridge to my thesis about the theology of the liberal theologian Fritz Buri, a disciple of Albert Schweitzer since his early years and later also of Karl Jaspers, a German philosopher teaching since 1948 in Basel (he left Germany, his wife was Jewish). Buri may be one of the last and most influential disciples of Schweitzer, although he went his own way in theology, philosophy and science of religion. All in organising and celebrating the jubilees of Schweitzer’s anniversaries since his 55th birthday until the end of his life in 1965 at 90 years.

Finally the theology of Buri was a kind of guidance to me, as if he thought in a similar way, but ahead of me. Therefore asking the question “how do we become human?” is to describe the personality and theology of Fritz Buri. I will first do it on the background of his roots in Albert Schweitzer’s “Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben” / “Reverence for Life” as a moral-idealistic attitude in life, which Buri first followed and later interpreted in his own way. It became an attitude in his life in the sense that it meant a lifelong search for “Lebensvollendung”, a fulfillment of life in committing and struggling against inhumanity. He called it a “will to absolute fulfillment in life” in overcoming the absurdity of being of human existence.

Part I

In the first part I should like to give some biographical notes of Fritz Buri’s life, a liberal Pastor and Professor of Systematic Theology, from Switzerland. His theology and historic background; his connection with “Freies Christentum” and IARF from 1936-1955 and freies Christentum in Germany till about 1975.

He was born into a miller family in the Canton of Berne, in the Emmental which might call in mind the typical images of Switzerland with cows and mountains and Swiss cheese. He grew up in an extended family with high intellectual ambition, when children at that time, or Fritz for example, were encouraged to learn reading before schooling.

Buri first met Schweitzer after the First World War in 1921 when he was a teenager. Schweitzer was invited to his home village Burgdorf for an organ concert. In the same year he had published *Zwischen Wasser*

und Urwald, about his first stay and experience as a medical doctor in Equatorial-Africa/Gabon. This book accompanied Buri for the next decades of his life. The personality of Schweitzer gave him a tremendous life motivation. When he started his studies and later his teaching career, he decided to continue the systematic and philosophical reflections of Schweitzer who, in Africa, had decided to give up his career as a professor in Strasbourg. The way Schweitzer was a Christian and was professionally committed convinced him.

Schweitzer had analysed the cultural and philosophical-ethical decay long before the First World War started – at the end of the nineteenth century - and decided to commit himself and to work against increasing inhumanity. One of the reasons he found for cultural decay is that culture did not continue to develop ethical basic values for progress which would have allowed to take up the discussion and debate with the progress in technique, research and natural science. Buri, three decades later, followed this way of analyzing and working against decay. In the beginning he took over “Reverence for Life” as a true ethical world view which is founding ethics in culture and which serves as a basis for reconstructing culture in a time (1930s) when the period after the First World War experienced a lot of tensions and anti-liberal and rather conservative tendencies in theology.

What is decisive for Buri and his theology is, that already at the beginning of his studies - according to his autobiography *Mein Weg* – he had read *The Quest of the historical Jesus* by Schweitzer. Schweitzer tried to prove that Jesus in his Jewish understanding and belief understood himself to be destined as Messiah and that the Kingdom of God would arrive in his lifetime. But in this belief, according to Schweitzer, Jesus was wrong. The end of the world did not take place and Jesus did not come again. The so-called unfulfilled expectation of Parousia of Schweitzer’s “Consequent Eschatology” which Buri shared in theology had early on caused him a “healing shock”. It influenced his relation to the Bible which he could not recognize as an unchallenged authority.

When he began his studies in Basel, Berne, then in Germany in Marburg and Berlin, he met mostly critical liberal professors who had already taken up early writings of Karl Barth (of course also his comments to the Römerbrief) (Theodor Siegfried, Rudolf Bultmann), but also some older liberal professors of a former generation that had welcomed at least at first the outbreak of the First World War (“Manifest an die Kulturwelt” of 93 intellectuals, including 13 theologians. Five of them were teachers of Buri: Adolf von Harnack, Adolf Deissmann, Wilhelm Herrmann, Reinhold Seeberg and Adolf Schlatter).

At that time, the end of the twenties, the liberal Swiss professor Martin Werner, also a disciple of Albert Schweitzer, started teaching in Berne and became Buri's mentor. Martin Werner was the founder and editor of *Schweizerische Theologische Umschau*, (1930-1965) a bimonthly theological review of liberal and free Christianity, which was and is in Switzerland part of the official church. Martin Werner was a study colleague of Karl Barth, who during the First World War began to turn against liberal professors and their theology, mainly with his publication of "Römerbrief" 1 and 2. His way of doing theology was called "Dialectic Theology".

A few words on the historic background in Switzerland: Liberal thinking was widespread in the church of the German speaking part of Switzerland in the nineteenth century, and tended to reform the church. Liberal politics was supportive of a liberal constitution and in 1874 the constitution was modified to include freedom of religion which meant: the reformed and catholic church are recognized by the state, there is freedom of confession and freedom of research. I mention this because this development was different from Germany, where liberal thinkers and theologians formed organizations (of Free Protestantism and of Free Christianity) within the Lutheran and Reformed church, and also free religious organizations and churches outside the official church.

We will here especially consider liberal theology under the influence of Albert Schweitzer. The 5th World Congress of Free Christianity and Religious Progress, 1910 in Berlin, where Schweitzer was also invited, had an important influence. Among many others the liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch spoke about "The Future Visions of Christianity" and he criticized the increasing tendency in and from social science (sociology) to give Community priority to its members, to give the public spirit priority to the subjects, and to give education priority to autonomy. But a liberal understanding in theology always meant the autonomy and freedom of the personality, in forming a personal identity and forming the personality in conscience of the relation to God. Schweitzer and Werner, and later Buri maintained this position of priority of the individual person before community. They realized already at that time that this position of individual autonomy was challenged and endangered.

Buri's first documented contact with free Christianity dates already of 1936. He then was 29. He participated in their Conference in Arnheim (Konferenz freigesinnter Theologen, in Arnheim (27.7.-2.8.1936) and he spoke to "Erneuerung der liberalen Theologie als Theologie der Spannung" (STU 6 1936 44-50), (Renewal of Liberal Theology as a Theology of Polarity).

In 1937 he participated in the 6th International Conference of L.I.B., Oxford, (29.7.-2.8.1937) as a speaker to “Die Kirche als Organ des freien Christentums“, (STU 7 1937 49-61) - (The Church as an Instrument of free Christianity). Then followed the World Congress for Free Christianity in Oxford (3.-8.8.1937) (SRV 71 1937 287f, 292-295).

In 1939 he participated in the Conference of the World Federation for Free Christianity in Bentveld, NL, speaking about “Der freie Protestantismus und die Bibel“, (*Protestantenblatt* 1939 39-41) – (Free Protestantism and the Bible).

The contacts and exchange with free Christianity were very essential for Buri and continued during the Second World War, when he had already started to teach as “Privatdozent” while serving a congregation as a pastor. He participated regularly at IARF conferences, as a speaker, until 1955. After the Second World War the IARF was reorganized. In 1948 Buri was the IARF delegate to the 1st Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam speaking about IARF and their priorities at the first Full Assembly of WCC. In the same year he was invited for three months as a guest professor to the Unitarian International Summer School, at Manchester College in Oxford.

He participated regularly at IARF conferences, as a speaker, until 1955.

1946: Konferenz des Weltbundes freichristlicher und freireligiöser Jugend, Manchester; International Rally, Gorton Manchester: “Die Aufgabe der Jugend“ (SRV 80 1946 277-280, 298-300); Opening Speech: International Religious Fellowship-Congress, Manchester: “Fire on Earth”, Fritz Buri as Vice-President of IRF (*Zwinglibund* 13, 1946 p.81-82; about IRF s. p.82-84; *Inquirer*. (‘Über die rot-weißen Grenzpfähle’, Reformierte Schweiz 3 1946 p.336ff); (‘Zur Lage des freien Protestantismus in Deutschland’, SRV No.42, 80th year, 1946 p.333-338.

1947: 2e Assemblée mondiale d’après-guerre du christianisme libéral, Berne; Lecture: ‘Die Bedeutung internationaler theologischer Konferenzen nach dem Kriege’, (*Le monde religieux*);

1947: Lecture for the Opening of the Work-Conference of the World Federation of Free Christianity in Manchester;

1948: Delegate of IARF: ‘Die IARF und ihre Anliegen an der ersten Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates in Amsterdam’ (The IARF at the 1st Full Assembly of the World Council of Churches); (‘Die Unordnung der Welt und Gottes Heilsplan. Zur Besinnung auf das Thema der Weltkirchenkonferenz’, SRV 83, 1948, p.125-128, 134-137; 141f);

1948: Invitation as guest professor for three months at the Unitarian International Summer School, Manchester College, Oxford (SRV 82, 1948 S.249-251)

1949: Congress of the World Federation for Free Christianity, Amsterdam; Official Report about the Congress (Der Bund, Bern, 1.8.1949; SRV 83, 1949, p.225f);

1950: 'Alter und neuer Liberalismus. Zum offiziellen Bericht über den Amsterdamer Kongress des Weltbundes für freies Christentum' (SRV 84, 1950 p.99-102, in Dutch and English translation); "Alter und neuer theologischer Liberalismus" (NZ, Basel 2.9.1950);

1951: 'Mit dem Weltbund in Amerika', (SRV 13,10. 1951); «Avec l'I.A.R.I. en Amérique»; (*Le Protestant* 15.10.1951);

First journey to USA (Diary 29.6.-2.8.1951) Lectures (McCormic, Chicago, New York). Publications in *Crozer Quarterly*: "Buri: Old and New Liberalism in Swiss Theology", *Crozer Quarterly*, July 1951, Vol. XXVIII No.3;

1952: 14th World Congress of the World Federation for Free Christianity, Oxford (12.-17.8.1952); 'Autorität als theologisches Problem. Ein Programm für die theologische Sektion des Kongresses' (STU 22 1952, 42-46);

1955: IARF World Congress in Belfast, together with Georg Wunsch (President of IARF): 'Sünde und Versöhnung als Grundbegriffe einer theologischen Anthropologie' (STU 3/4, 25th year Juli 1955);

1955: Quinzième Congrès mondial de l'Association internationale pour le christianisme libéral et la liberté religieuse, Belfast, 23.-28.7.1955, (*Le Protestant* 15.3.1955);

During the Second World War and afterwards the growing influence of Karl Barth and his followers in the German speaking part of Switzerland led to theological polarization. During these years Buri made additional studies in German literature. For him it was the moment to prove the thesis of Schweitzer of "Consistent Eschatology" in literature and find examples of poets and writers who seem to express an eschatological understanding according to Schweitzer. It means that they speak and describe inner (religious) transformation of individuals caused by crisis in life, in relationship or caused through social changes. He found this more fruitful than all theological discussions with followers of Barth. So he mainly read works of the Nobel prize winner Carl Spitteler (1845-1924) and of Gottfried Keller (1819-1890), who

was a critic of certain liberal tendencies in Switzerland. Why did Buri do that? He always wanted to understand from those who criticize whether their critique is substantial and whether they point to a problem which is overlooked, hidden or tabooed. This was a characteristic for Buri. Gottfried Keller in the nineteenth century refused to accept that in a mere formal believing of the doctrine automatically the inner understanding, as a religious awakening, would be formed. He opens a new religious perspective in taking distance from traditional Christianity.

One quotation from Buri, to describe Keller's understanding of faith: (cit. p.197 'Gottfried Kellers Glaube. Ein Bekenntnis zu seinem Protestantismus', 1944). It is about humanness of humans, the experience of an occurrence by which a meaningful life design and world design becomes possible. Buri describes it:

... das wahre Christliche ist zugleich das wahrhaft Menschliche und das zutiefst Menschliche das wesenhaft Christliche /

The true Christian is at the same time truly Human(e) and the deeply Human(e) is essentially Christian.

It may be correct, to translate humane instead of human. But it may then also mean that the human being is not considered as fundamentally evil, corrupt and fully incapable of doing right (as e.g. it was the case in Karl Barth's Dialectic Theology).

According to Buri Schweitzer did not fix himself at any historically traditioned Christianity as an authority (the doctrine e.g.) but takes his own personal experience as a starting point. But this is not a libertine understanding, he is and remains connected with tradition. This own self-reflection as a pure-minded feeling of the heart takes the right to decide over the meaning of the religious tradition. It examines whether it can be taken as an expression of today's understanding of existence. It means that the commitment for dignity and the authentic existence of humans is "to be gained only through one's own religious experience", and that it is not compatible with an extrinsic revelation to be taken over as an authority. This means the immediacy of authentic belief.

Later Buri also entered into the literature of existentialist philosophy, after having read the publications of Karl Jaspers, such as of Friedrich Nietzsche, Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger and others. During these years, until beginning of the 1950s, he followed Schweitzer's theological positions e.g. of "Reverence for Life", and of "Unfulfilled Parousia" although this caused him challenges and refusal

among a number of colleagues now orientated towards Karl Barth.

The ethics of “Reverence for Life” is an ethos ethics (Gesinnungsethik) of life affirmation which addresses and is directed to the other living being, as conditional and constitutive (Hingabe). This gift of one’s life to the other is without intent (absichtslos) or conditions and therefore – according to Schweitzer – comes out of a primary intuition and out of the heart. For Schweitzer it is a human act and therefore universally understandable. This universal human understanding he had already described in 1921 in “Zwischen Wasser und Urwald” as a “Fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain, as a (possible) englobing community.” (Brüderschaft der vom Leid Gezeichneten). A human is never a total and permanent stranger to another human being. Man belongs to man. But in including the non-human world, Schweitzer even goes beyond and has a wholistic view.

Today we would add – and I think Schweitzer would consent - that about half of the world consists of women who will also be fully included as human beings and not just as “Brüder”...

Schweitzer received the Nobel prize for “Reverence for Life” in 1952. In the fifties he repeatedly addressed the danger of atomic bombs and the nuclear fallout also on its effects for future generations and shared ideas of World Peace.

Buri started to criticize the thesis of Schweitzer “Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben” as being not clear enough. When Schweitzer maintains that the will of life is as well thinking, Buri opposes this with arguments from Karl Jaspers, that this is not possible. An objective thinking cannot be found in being (Dasein), that means in the will of life, but rather in conscious(ness). He wanted to make the thesis of Schweitzer stronger.

Under the influence of Jaspers he develops an understanding of existence which should lead back (Rückführung) to religion on the one hand and into ethics on the other hand as an ethical theology, which he formulates with “existence” (oriented at Jaspers, not at Heidegger). This meant that he contributed primarily to an evident lack of unity, a unity of the person in relation to transcendence. This is in correspondence with protestant tradition as the ideal of “self perfection” (Selbstvervollkommnung) and with Schweitzer who had taken it up and formulated in his reverence for life.

Buri later (from the 1950s) continued to focus on “responsibility” which is especially developed in his 3rd volume of *Dogmatik als Selbstverständnis des christlichen Glaubens*, in “God in America”.

Buri at the beginning of his professional life took over from Schweitzer the (cultural) ethical position of an atonement to be performed as reparation of culture as well as the position of an ethics of Reverence for life. This meant, according to Schweitzer, also to adopt a different understanding of mission and missionary as usually applied. For Schweitzer the understanding of being missionary (as a medical doctor and not as a pastor) meant to do justice, to perform atonement for all negative effects of missionary work in the past. It is based on humanness (instead of “Missionsbefehl” / great commission). It was probably also a reaction to the consequences of the practice of slavery.

Buri then wrote a small booklet for the catechumens preparing for confirmation: *Teaching Christian faith: 50 questions and answers* (1957), in which the 50th question is: Why should we and can we do mission work? The answer of Buri is that it means: “That we can perform atonement for what we did harm to many with our ‘Christian’ culture.... Both – the testimony of faith and the atonement – is only possible if we do not spread our belief but wish to help people to believe (in a way that is also the goal of this catechism).” Again: Not a credo but a testimony of one’s own faith in a living example and commitment. Not spreading belief but assist others to come to believe.

One may see here the first beginnings of a dialogue with other faiths and beliefs. Buri had some doctoral students from South Korea and Japan. He encouraged them not just to deepen their studies in Christian theology but to go back to their own religious and cultural roots, which are in South Korean Buddhism and Confucianism, besides Shamanism. This was a surprise and new to them, and they did. They got to understand better their own culture. For Buri it was to lead the other to the true him-herself, to what they are. To encourage students to go back to their roots. Not just to take over a foreign Religion, as Christianity is called in Far East countries.

Part II

As Karl Barth had to leave Germany under Hitler legislation he came to Switzerland in 1935, to Basel. Buri started teaching at Basel University in 1939 while still being pastor in the canton of Berne. Buri and Barth met regularly at the faculty and university. Buri read all new publications of Barth and wrote critiques for the daily newspapers and theological reviews, always well founded in critical arguments and often quite revealing. It was a time of polarization between at least two theological fields.

Buri admits that Barth had some influence on him, mainly that he gave him (paternalistic) “advice” to write his own dogmatics, instead of criticizing him all the time. Buri takes it seriously and starts the first of 3 volumes of the *Dogmatics as Self-Understanding of the Christian Faith*, written from 1956 – 1978. This was the opportunity for Buri to develop his theological thinking and to deepen his understanding of existence and self-understanding.

Schweitzer had already warned of an abuse of the possibilities in research and its possible destructive use of their results as early as his criticism on Nietzsche and throughout all his life, especially against nuclear research, Buri is aware of this and we can see how he takes it up. In 1962 he contributes with a lecture at Basel University in a cycle of speeches to “Mensch und Erde” on “Die Verantwortung des Menschen für die Erde im christlichen Glauben” (The responsibility of the human for the earth in Christian belief).

To give his position in short: On one side the mandate to humans of one of the two creation stories in the Bible, to dominate/subdue the earth, is well known and put into practice in all times with all consequences of human-made catastrophes, exploiting the earth with all social consequences, and where the human experiences him/herself more and more as an object of his/her own actions. On the other side, even more known, is the other creation or Lost-Paradise story, represented in art, literature and cultivated in religious and moral concepts. Only in the last few decades has a new reflection appeared about a forgotten part of the creation myth, caused by changes in our environment and daily reality: to cultivate and to preserve/care for the earth. Preservation of creation has become an ecumenical issue. Buri spoke of the secret of creation (Ehrfurcht vor dem Schöpfungsgeheimnis) – Reverence for the Mystery of Creation – as a theological term, his own words for Schweitzer’s Reverence for Life. In order to emphasize and overcome the dualism between mind and body or here especially theology and research in science, he used the method of Jaspers and spoke of the objectifying thinking in science that would never be able to grasp the subjective (in a positive sense) values of religion and belief. His conclusion: There are no directions coming from science for a responsible use of all the new possibilities it has opened, it is ethically neutral. These possibilities have taken dimensions which even question their domination by humans. Rather a domination by these technologies who promised to liberate us, so we have become at the same slaves of this ongoing technical progress applied on earth. He called for a new paradigm which combines knowledge in the technical disciplines with the consciousness of an infinitely enlarged responsibility.

It is an ongoing process of development, on the one hand the progress in science and the danger of destruction of the whole earth as well as the dissolution of the traditional forms of responsibility of humans for the earth in religion or cultural concepts. This was the situation in the 1960s and the question of responsibility for the earth which was up for humans at that time.

Buri, like Schweitzer, appeals to a personal decision for the realisation of the responsibility for the earth which cannot be taken over by any ethics, dogmatics, cultural programme and even not by the bible. No institution, organisation neither governmental nor church may take over the testimony of the individual person for his/her responsibility for the being of the earth.

About fifteen years later Buri finished his university career at 70, as was the practise at that time. He held a Closing Lecture in 1978 on: *Theologische Ethik und ethische Theologie: Abschiedsvorlesung 22.2.1978 Universität Basel*. Bulletin 10, which again he had an opportunity to hold in the USA in 1982, exactly translated: 'Theological Ethics and Ethical Theology', Louise Iliff visiting Professor at the Iliff School of Theology, Lecture November 10, 1982 (transl.)

In Buri's Lecture we find his early positions again, underlying Schweitzer's thesis of the unfulfilled Parousia and of the coming up of the church as a consequence of the ongoing chronological time and history (instead of the end of the earth and cosmos) as predicted by Jesus. In his speech Buri compares the traditional salvation history of various forms with his own proposal of a reflection on ethical theology, continuing his criticism of a "traditional" theology of salvation history which maintains a theological ethics, which according to Kant is impossible. Going back to Immanuel Kant who required an ethical theology with the question "what shall I do?" Buri claimed an ethical theology for today. While all forms of theological ethics have in common a salvation history, and witness of God's revelation which is accepted in faith, according to Buri, this is, as a belief system, not questioned further at a certain point by reason.

For Buri, to find an answer to the question "what we shall do?", the individual is not referred merely to oneself, one's environment and the history of that environment. For him the answers found therein are unsure and contradictory to each other.

The meaning of the world (Buri's early existential question was: Why is there Anything and not Nothing?) will remain unknown. The answer that faith perceives is not sufficient for Buri: Faith perceives

what God's plan for creation is, what God has done for creation and will do. God's declaration of God's will are the commandments, on this basis a person can know what is good and evil. For Buri in this connection the idea of creation becomes ethically significant. God created humans in God's own image. And made the human as co-worker and partner. God entrusted humans with the cultivation of the earth. Humans must respect the order which God has given creation. If they do not, they fall to punishment of the judgment of God. This goes back to the Fall of Adam and the curse of sin and guilt (cf Jewish understanding). The bible sees human history in wide sections under this curse. It is the world of Paradise Lost.

Buri gives an example of this – in his view - problematic ethics use with the biblical idea of creation. With this idea theological ethics can refer to the respect we owe to all creatures. But it is problematic or even fatal when in the creation story the command of God is to “subject the earth!” and when we think of the consequences in imperialism and colonialism and in the threat to the environment by Christian people's technical capacities.

Buri does not accept the explanation that such wrong-doing is a misunderstanding, for the creator also gave commandments forbidding such inhumanity. However, Buri contradicts, in the creation story itself, there is no talk of commandments limiting the rule of the world or the use of nature.... Moreover the commands and order require human interpretation for their application, and therewith they unavoidably lose the divinity attributed to them. For theological ethics they belong to the world corrupted by sin.

Buri asks: May God punish humanity at all – in history and at the end of history, in the last judgment – after God had allowed, if not ordered, the Fall of Adam and allowed or made possible the consequences of the Fall? This doctrine of the Fall of Adam in its development into the doctrine of original sin (which does not exist in Judaism) places in question human ability to judge what is just and is not just... it places human guilt in question. As profound as this doctrine is, it has the effect – especially in its form in Reformation doctrine – of laming ethics.

In a similar way Buri deconstructs the doctrine of reconciliation or of redemption. If already in the doctrine of sin one cannot really speak of guilt when the matter is regarded legally, so in the doctrine of redemption guilt is only imaginatively extinguished by a foreign sacrifice which may be transposed and made effective only by sacramental magic or fictive legalism.

The criticism of Buri:

Today theological ethics vainly tries to escape this problem of its doctrine of redemption on the one hand by borrowing from secular psychology and on the other turning by to the long neglected sphere of society and politics... In psychologizing the old order of salvation, theological ethics runs the danger of abandoning its foundation. ... The psychological structure of secular humanity is different from that of biblical humanity.

Buri now comes back again to the thesis of Schweitzer – As a theological structure the theology of revelation as all Christian theology owes its origin and its history to one fact: the non-occurrence of the Parousia. The disaster of theological ethics and its promise lies in that non-occurrence. It is the fate of theological ethics that it sees itself caused, by the unexpected course of history, to try to make valid the salvation in its salvation history by ever new theological formations in history.

Buri's position of ethical reflection:

The role played by revelation and faith in theology is in ethics that of awareness of responsible personal being. Just as the whole of salvation history, to which theological ethics refers, presupposes revelation and faith, so ethical reflection in all its essential moments presupposes an awareness of responsibility or of being determined for responsibility.

Awareness of personal responsibility is so comprehensive that it encompasses every reflection of whatever kind, whether theological or specifically ethical. In every case we are the ones who do the reflecting – whatever area intended is, whatever the circumstances and conditions of the reflection are.

There is no answer to the ultimate questions about the why and for-what-of being. The ground of being remains for us a mystery and its meaning an enigma.

Buri's ethical reflection is: In your self-understanding you are in every case responsible for your decisions and the consequences of your decisions. This is the voice of God in us. It is God's commandment that we know ourselves unconditionally responsible. Our image of God consists in our awareness of being called to such responsibility. For responsibility is, in the frame of our causal thought, like a creation from nothing.

Not only the fact that this voice can be silent belongs to this enigma of meaning, but also the fact that we can refuse to listen to it that we can refuse our determination to being self, that we can content ourselves with the relative responsibilities and that we can try to excuse this our failure by appealing to the conditions of the relative responsibilities.

The true church occurs where people know themselves determined to be unconditionally responsible for each other, where they can so form their existence that the individual can perceive what responsibility is, and where it is possible for the individual to live responsibly... whoever tries to be seriously responsible will experience the fact that responsibility is not a formal criterion, but a very concrete criterion which is socially effective. It is a criterion which, like the Holy Spirit, is able to distinguish among spirits and which presents the principle of life of the new world promised in the Bible – a new world which breaks into our reality where we let ourselves be led by the concrete criterion. In the community of responsibility there is Parousia.

Fritz Buri was able to combine philosophical and theological thinking thus bridging various backgrounds, also in interfaith dialogue especially with Zen-Buddhism and Confucianism, at a very early stage. Buri is convinced of the importance of science of religion “Religionswissenschaft” and their impact on theology as well as from theology on science of religion. In 1977 he founded the Swiss society for science of religion (SGR), which still exists. One of the co-founders was the catholic professor Richard Friedli of the University of Fribourg.

He also was familiar with Hans Küng. (Fritz Buri in: ‘Glaube und Verantwortung bei Hans Küng’ in: Günther Hauff, ed.: *Verantwortung übernehmen*. Ein Lesebuch. Fritz Buri, 1987, p. 124-127). Hans Küng asked him in 1979 to comment to “Verantworteter Glaube”. (‘Responsible Belief’). Buri approved the method of Küng (*analogia entis*) (whereas dialectic theology states a completely diastasis of humans and God). Yet criticism of Buri: Responsibility as self-understanding from the side of the person to understanding oneself under God’s guidance as proclaimed in the Gospels for all occurrence / happening in direction of salvation, this is not mentioned by Küng and is not reflected. He merely believes, in accepting this message.

Part III

The conference question “Does Religion set You Free?” is interlinked with “How do We become Human?”. Simply said: When religion sets

one free, the person becomes humane. So it is not our effort, but Grace, it happens.

For me it is also my personal way, to be freed of an – in German - “evangelical” or better “fundamentalist,” oppressive, background, which brought me into a psychological crisis while still at home. This urged me to search for answers, and into a liberal direction as well as into feminist perspectives and theology. I had the belief that there must be something liberating in religion and faith – I would say it is love – which kept me waiting and searching. It was a test I made, waiting for any proof to come. It did. I got involved first into yoga meditation and then to Taizé in 1974 and into theology.

Therefore, I wondered whether the theology of Buri would further lead me to what and who I am. I would say yes it did and this theology also, not only, led me to God. This is what a spiritual Brother in Taize explained to me: if it leads you further to God. You may follow.

Of course such a study and thesis is encouraging also for future perspectives. So my question is: how and what is relevant in Buri’s theology today?

When the Fritz Buri-Gesellschaft was founded in 1995 we prepared a one-day conference once a year until 2008. The lectures and discussions of these conferences were recorded and published. They all had the perspective in view of continuing the theology of Buri in various ways, but also eventual limitations because of changing trends in theology.

So I was myself during the study reflecting on some possible follow-up.

I saw a relevance during my work as a chaplain at hospital: the connection of malady and existential situation. The inner personal conflicts, sometimes mixed with belief, are open and one question which 1/3 of patients asked is: why does this happen to me? Or: why does God admit this? And an answer I tried to give, out of my existential experience is: you are not your malady, you are more and something else. Here is the link to be a person, for humaneness I would say. And of course to a religious belief.

To fight against inhumanity means also to fight for Human Rights, if life-fulfillment has to do with becoming fully a person, humane. From this basis I have problems with robots, which appear to me as a reduction of human being and being human. I also have similar

problems with issues of human enhancement, so as if Nature is merely insufficient. I understand myself as being part of nature, which is not to be reduced. On the contrary I suppose there is much more to be discovered and revered with nature.

I see a relevance of Buri's theology for today in an ecological theology, in an ethical theology about responsibility, in interfaith dialogue (Asian philosophy; Jewish-Christian dialogue).

When I found a very large legacy/inheritance and started to read some correspondence, I realized that not only his contacts to IARF may be of relevance. I found out that his wife, Elsa Buri, was involved in the activities of the International Association of Liberal Religious Women (IALRW), mainly when a conference was prepared in Berne in 1955. I am one of the Vice Presidents of IALRW and I am interested in historic events because IALRW is very probably the first world organization of women in interreligious dialogue. Actually, any information and trace I may find about IALRW in Switzerland is of interest for me.

On the other hand I represent IARF as an NGO at UN-Geneva for Human Rights. In this field I see a chance for Buri's theology of existence as it is encouraging to empower human resistance, and of course women's resilience (CSW). I see a connection with faith-based organizations which are getting stronger in working together on an interfaith level.

As a free-lance journalist I work with the WCC and see the importance of talking of liberal theology, freedom of religion. If there are tendencies to favourize 'evangelical', charismatic and Pentecost movements, it would need more theological reflection on the liberal side.