

Weal and woe: introduction

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Theology is a discipline of major issues. We are interested in the fundamental questions of human existence, suffering and hope, identity and community, good and evil, history and future, salvation and damnation. We always run the risk of expanding our subject matter unto 'the world and surroundings'. To avoid that, we have focused our joint attention in this book to the level of lived religion and faith in human biographies. What do terms like salvation, shalom, evil, and damnation mean in these biographies?

It is no coincidence that we have focused on these terms. These are central concepts in the Christian theological tradition and rightly so. They cut to the heart of human existence in a world of mixed blessings: joy and sorrow. Moreover, they express that in one way or another these experiences transcend that existence. They might be interpreted as referring to God. In that sense, these belong to the core concepts of Christian faith. There is, however, a problem. Unlike generations of theologians before us, we cannot elude the fact that the Christian world is a mere shade of its former self, at least in the western world. We are forced to account for the fact that there are scores of religious views and practices both inside and outside the Christian tradition, not to mention the various non-religious views and practices that function in the same domain of existential questions and experiences. All this precludes a theological discussion of the terms in an isolated Christian way. We will have to explore the interactions between Christian and non-Christian interpretations and concepts, as well as between religious and non-religious versions. These explorations are probably the pivotal task of theology in the years to come. Practical theology, we believe, will be center stage fulfilling that task because it engages in real-life investigations of these varieties of meanings. Our understanding of practical theology as the (theological) study of the praxis of religion and worldviews drives us to investigate what the central terms of religion might mean in people's biographies.

To pose the question in this manner means that we abstain from theological abstractions. It also means that we are forced to explore the differences and interactions between religious and secular meanings. In our native language (Dutch), as in German, the word for salvation (*heil*) has a very broad meaning. It can denote the ultimate bliss of eternal life or the effects of the salvation (being saved), but it can also point to physical or mental well-being. It can be as profound as eternal salvation or as shallow as weal or luck. It can be as corporate as the Kingdom of

God or as individual as personal happiness. In short, it parallels the Hebrew shalom in both its religious and secular connotations. Likewise, the counterpart 'onheil' can mean anything from bad luck or woe to disaster, evil, or damnation. If we explore these meanings in contemporary biography, we seek to highlight the meanings attributed.

This exploration of the meanings of salvation and evil in biography is the heart of the research program of practical theologians, ethicists, and social scientists from Kampen Theological University. In all the diversity of research themes, we have devoted ourselves to a joint project in which we explore contemporary meanings and connections between salvation, evil, and biography. The program consists of conceptual discussions reflected in this volume, empirical investigations, theological reflections and strategic recommendations.

A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

At the very beginning, we conducted a small-scale street survey¹ to calibrate our vocabularies that had been molded for years through theological usage. We asked people what they would mean by the terms 'heil' (weal) and 'onheil' (woe), and invited them to provide examples of situations they would characterize as such. Our expectation that 'heil' and 'onheil' would carry opposite meanings was belied by the outcomes. Instead of forming a polar construction of meanings, the two terms proved to have their own domains of meanings.

For weal ('heil'), 17 % of the participants could not describe the meaning. The other responses can be divided into four categories. The first one, secular well-being, comprises 27 % of the responses. These responses express convictions of what is beneficial for the personal lives of people. Examples are personal happiness in relationships, health, springtime, and good school grades. The second one, religious connotations, accounted for 22 %. Examples are: 'Jesus heals me' and 'If people live a good life, they will be rewarded'. These responses convey the notion that there is a person of power beyond our human realm that supports or offers well-being. It may also express the more focused meanings of salvation that are found in evangelical or orthodox reformed circles. The third category (20 %) is linguistic. These responses contain synonyms or explanations of the term, without illustrating examples. Repeatedly weal was connected to peace and to blessing, reminding of standing formulas from New Year's Eve and Christmas. Finally, 8 % of the responses contained an unexpected association of weal with WWII, through the expressions 'Sieg Heil' and 'Heil Hitler'. These

¹ From this preliminary survey we make no generalizing claims (statistical or otherwise). To evaluate the outcomes presented here, it is useful to know that we chose a suburban shopping mall in a major city to conduct our interviews. 49 respondents participated, almost equally men and women. There was reasonable distribution in age groups (8% < 20; 41 % 21-40; 31 % 41-60; 18 % 61-80; 2 % missing). Self-description as religious (55%) / non-religious (43 %) and membership of religious groups (49 %) are around average. 8 % identified as members of Islamic or eastern religious groups.

connotations, negative as they are, nevertheless seem to imply a positive original meaning for weal, that is defiled by the Nazi abuse of the term.

The meanings of woe ('onheil') could be categorized in the same way. Here only 2 % was unable to describe the term. The largest category, secular not well-being, accounted for 40 %. It includes examples of personal misfortune like homeless people in front of your house, illness, family quarrels, falling from something, or being ran over by a bus. The second category parallels the last category of weal in that it refers to major negative events like wars. As it happens, the day these street interviews were conducted was the start of the war on Iraq, and this example alone filled the 31 % of this category. The third one is linguistic (15 %). Here woe is repeatedly explained as the antonym of weal, or defined as something bad or trouble. The fourth and smallest category here is the religious one (13 %). It includes examples like evil, the dark things, and the devil.

We concluded our preliminary explorations by analyzing the relations between the categories. If we combine the answers, we find that 21 % of the respondents have no clear conception of the concepts. They are unable to attribute meaning to weal and they cannot describe woe beyond the obvious connection to a war that just started. The most common connection between the examples for weal and woe is found between the categories of secular well-being and secular not well-being. 16 % of the participants come up with this combination. There seems to be an integrated concept behind these answers. For 10 % of the participants, both weal and woe are to be understood in religious terms. Here we can for example find a combination of weal as salvation, and woe as coming from the devil.

Although for both weal and woe we could identify the same categories of meaning, the two terms are not necessarily part of a binary construct. Weal need not be the opposite of woe, and salvation is not the counterpart of evil. Whereas our participants regularly interpret weal as a religious category, this is only seldom the case for woe. For both terms, the category of (not) well-being is the first that comes to mind. The connection between the religious and the secular interpretations is a matter for further investigation. Is there a common ground for these interpretations, a complex of meanings like in the case of the Hebrew 'shalom'? Possibly. But if so, what is the significance that either religious or secular elements of this complex of meanings are expressed by individual participants?

THE RESEARCH PROGRAM

The exploration of the meanings of weal and woe has just started and involves the complex of terms like salvation, shalom, well-being, the good life, evil, and damnation. The research program this volume originates from works with a central joint project in which we conduct this exploratory investigation. The central question of this project is: How do individuals interpret personal experiences of weal and woe, and how is this interpretation related to the religious frame of reference and biography on the one hand and to their style of coping on the

other? This question expresses a focus on biography and lived religion, as indicated earlier.

That focus is firstly a matter of methodology. Biography is not necessarily a separate field of research, but a perspective to integrate societal, cultural, and religious developments on both the corporate and the individual level. The question arises how societies organize the human life course, and which scenarios or patterns of interpretation are offered by cultural groups and worldviews. On the individual level, it asks how people experience and structure their own life course. These questions have become all the more topical in our late modern or postmodern times.

The focus on biography is secondly a matter of content or perspective. Theories of modernization point out that in our contemporary society people want and need to shape their own lives. This changes the biography from a neutral account of what happens in a lifetime into a reflexive project and process, turning individuals into authors of their own lives (Giddens 1991). Modernization implies the farewell to a standard biography in favor of a choice biography. The construction of biographies has become the topic of reflection in various academic discourses.

The biographical meanings in the realm of weal and woe have to be explored in light of this modernized identity. We therefore have to focus on the individual constructions and their significance for the individual and his or her personal and social context. In these constructions, we expect to witness the variety of categories that were observed in the preliminary street survey. Even in theological parlance such a variety can be found. Salvation/shalom and evil refer to central symbols and practices that should be understood in their interrelatedness. Sometimes they are expressed in a religious, or even specific Christian way. In one way or another, religion promises salvation from evil and suffering. Non-religious worldviews, however, are likewise directed toward the good life and coping with evil. An exemplary field in which these questions are labored is found in our health care systems. Health is usually considered a central value, and attacks on health count as woe or evil. A specific Christian interpretation of shalom/salvation refers to the good we receive from God through Jesus Christ. In the Christian tradition, the expectation and proclamation of salvation are shaped in the midst of the experience of suffering and sin, evil and tragedy. Every statement or experience of weal/shalom/salvation gains its meaning from the negative background it implies. Thus forgiveness is connected with sin, eternal life with mortality, kingdom of God with injustice and imperfection, and so on. Every religious tradition struggles with the relation between high expectations of God's shalom, and the harsh reality of evil. These questions are addressed – obviously not solved – in research on theodicy (Van der Ven & Vossen 1995 ed.) as well as in research on religious coping (Pargament 1997, Ganzevoort 1998). The contribution of the present research program lies in its integrative approach and in its effort to explore the domains of meanings of weal and woe in their Christian, religious, and secular shapes.

The program includes (among quite diverse projects alluded to in the various chapters of this book) two shared empirical research projects that are being executed simultaneously. The first – quantitative – study explores the relationship between attributions of weal and woe in specific vignettes and religious and secular coping activities. In this project we try to establish the semantic fields in their viability for dealing with life events. In the vignettes we have included present and absent triggers in the dimensions of religion and ethics. We have gathered over 600 responses from students in higher education that are being analyzed. The second study uses a qualitative design to explore the meanings of the central terms (or their equivalents) and their relation to biographical elements. We want to know what people mean when they speak of weal and woe, what words they use, in which circumstances these interpretations are meaningful, and whether and how they connect their usage with a religious tradition. From a group of 20 participants (probably students), proportionally religious and non-religious, autobiographical documents will be gathered about their most positive and most negative experiences. Analysis of content and structure will clarify the processes of interpretation as weal and woe and the religious references. Publication of the results of these two studies and a multidisciplinary reflection upon these results are scheduled for the near future.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The present volume has grown out of the numerous conversations the research group has enjoyed in working on this project. Although we fully agree with one another that the actual meaning of the terms should be investigated empirically (and inductively!), we are equally convinced that we are called upon to conceptualize the central terms of ‘heil’ and ‘onheil’. In our discussions however, we did not arrive at a common definition. The most we could do was identify two core elements in speaking of ‘heil’ – weal, salvation, shalom – and ‘onheil’ – woe, evil, damnation – in a pregnant way. One is that the positive or negative experiences are interpreted as having a transcending source. This need not be God in a metaphysical view of transcendence, but at least there is the signification that there is a reason, ‘something’ or ‘someone’ that makes this happen. The other meaning is that these interpretations are related to what a person sees as the nucleus or destination of her or his life. In a maximizing conceptualization one holds that both meanings should be present (or even that both should be expressed in Christian terms); in a minimizing conceptualization either meaning would qualify. The reader will find that the various chapters in this book hold different conceptualizations. In different ways they relate weal and woe with one another and with human biographies. This contributes to the aim of the volume: exploring the meanings of weal and woe, salvation and evil.

Evert Jonker opens the discussion by exploring the intricacies of the terms weal and woe and their semantic fields of salvation, evil, blessing, and redemption. He starts by explicating his position in church education and in a particular context. Accounting for the hermeneutical consequences of such a positioning, he then

explores the meaning of life course and life stories (a theme to be discussed in detail in several other chapters) and the role of traditional religious ‘feedback systems’ that shape and inform our narrative interpretations and practices. Jonker shows that these feedback systems not only steer the narrative actions of believers, but also the religious guidance of church professionals and the theological theories of researchers. Discussing both particular contents, and theological perspectives and methods, Jonker allows for both explicitly Christian and general anthropological interpretations of weal and woe. He identifies central tensions in practical theological theory building and concludes his chapter with two research illustrations in which theology is brought to the task of understanding specific connotations of weal and woe.

In the next chapter, *Frits de Lange* addresses the second core concept: biography. Following Giddens and other theorists of modernity, he describes identity as a self-reflexive project. This has led to the idea of the choice biography, but De Lange is critical of such views. He mentions the disembedding mechanisms of modernization and questions the liberal form of individualization with its lack of attention for communal structures. How good is the liberal life course model for people? Of course this question merits empirical investigation as well, but ethicist De Lange engages in a much-needed normative reflection on life course discourses in contemporary culture. He claims that the liberal model suits some groups in society more than others. To further his exploration of salutary life course models, De Lange takes up the five-dimensional model of practical reason developed by Browning (1991). He explores the narrative visions of life course in liberal and Christian shapes, the obligatory level of principle ethics and neighbor love, the ambivalent relation between Christianity and its modernized context, the communal and relational nature of human needs and desires, and the rules and roles of contract relationships. The aim of practical theology and ethics, thus De Lange, is helping people in the construction of their life course. The task for theological ethics is to shed light on the credits and shortcomings of the Christian tradition.

Following these two explorations of weal and woe and of biography respectively, *Ruard Ganzevoort* sets out to explore the inherent connections between the two. His central thesis is that we tell the stories of our lives to articulate our yearning for shalom (the term used by Ganzevoort as being broader than salvation). To elaborate this thesis, he first develops a formal-narrative framework with six dimensions: structure, perspective, experience, role assignment, relational positioning, and audience. In these dimensions, the dialectical connection between the life course and the life story can be described. Events in the life course demand interpretation in the life story (emplotment), and the life story results in moves and actions in the life course (enactment). There remains, however, always a gap between the life course and the life story that provides the potential for yearning. In the relation with the audience, attention is given to the weight of the canonical context offered to the narrator. These models offer the structures for what may count as good, true, and salutary. In these ways, the life

story is directed to the enhancement of personal and social identity. The narrator seeks to construe a story of shalom, well-being, and of a good life. Here meanings of heil (wholeness) and holiness merge. Ganzevoort moves on to describe the process of yearning, illustrated in the stories of the beginning and end of one's life. Beyond the evident boundaries, we construe transcending stories that aim at existential shalom. In the dialectic connection between the life course and the life story (enactment and emplotment) this allows for a performative understanding of the enactment of shalom through our narrative constructions.

This enactment of shalom is the key to the next chapter. From the perspective of psychology of religion, *Barbara Roukema-Koning* describes praying practices as the enactment of shalom. Building on her empirical research on prayer practices, she describes how prayer is a form of enacting processes of meaning making. Praying can function as a state of being oriented towards 'God', as communication with 'God', as turning inwards to be open to experiences, and/or as conduct that is part of a relationship. These categories are described and illustrated empirically. Next she highlights the contribution of prayer to the awareness of shalom in a person's biography. Psychologically, prayer contributes to the understanding of destination in life, and facilitates the attribution of a variety of positive or negative experiences to a transcending source, 'God'. Especially when the orientation towards 'God' and openness to one's own experiences are combined, a personalized understanding of shalom becomes possible as well as a direct connection to the matters of daily living. Roukema-Koning concludes by discussing briefly the communal meta-structure offered by the religious tradition in which pray-ers participate. She claims that shalom (or salvation) is a Protestant root metaphor for praying.

The analysis of such a communal meta-structure and root metaphor benefits from an inquiry into the canonical stories the Christian tradition offers to influence our biographies. *Heye Heyen* therefore investigates this offer as it is articulated in contemporary sermons. He analyzes eleven (German) sermons on Isaiah 52:7-10, held on December 23, 2001. In these sermons, he studies the implicit or explicit notions of evil opposite which salvation is portrayed. Heyen distinguishes between sermons in which the preacher tries to convince the audience that they are in a situation of evil (notably in a state of damnation for not being converted) and sermons resting on consensus on prevailing experiences of evil. The analysis yields twelve different notions of evil, spanning from war and terror via depression, traumatized past, daily worries, and 'the lost God' to the confrontation with unbelievers. Here Tillich's (1963, 191) words ring true that 'the term "salvation" has as many connotations as there are negativities from which salvation is needed'.

Complementing Heyen's analysis of the meanings of evil and salvation offered in sermons, *Hanneke Schaap-Jonker* investigates how sermons are interpreted biographically. Her focus on lived religion results in a case study of an orthodox reformed woman in her fifties, and the question what she understands to be salvation in relation to the sermon that she has heard. Schaap-Jonker builds on

psychological theories to develop a practical theological theory of the reception of sermons. Biographical factors play a major role in this reception. The participant in the case study values traditional Christian concepts of salvation and stresses impurity and unholiness as evils on her part. Notions of unworthiness are connected with corporality that gets a sexual connotation in the bible stories recounted. Her biography has pertinent influence in how she has heard the sermon that is studied. The theme of temptation is coupled with her own notion of impurity. Salvation in this case takes on eschatological features, unattainable in this life. Schaap-Jonker and Heyen thus explore two sides of the same coin.

The interaction of biographical elements and offers from the Christian tradition is also central to the contribution of *Geertje de Vries*. Unlike the preceding chapters, she does not address either pole, but the interaction itself. Her locus is on church learning groups, and she asks whether such groups can be seen as places where people practice the enactment of shalom. She takes her starting point in the tensions or gaps between experiences of every day life and the messages from the bible and the tradition. In the relation between the two, we can identify movements of comfort, challenge, and clarification. A salutary group, De Vries maintains, should satisfy the conditions of all three movements. She elaborates this thesis with Chopp's metaphor of 'quilting' theology. From fragments of second-hand textiles, quilts are made communally. Transposed to theology, and focusing on weal and woe, three criteria emerge: dialogue, justice, and imagination. Finally, De Vries identifies two connections between the individual's biography and the offer from the Christian tradition: congruence and confrontation. Whereas congruence expresses the similar, confrontation is about the difference. Both are legitimate connections, and in many learning processes the two alternate.

If the preceding chapters address the connection between weal and woe in biography with the wider tradition, the final three chapters explore the meanings outside the particular Christian religious tradition. *Lieke Werkman* deals with the field of ethics, thus taking up the notion of justice that was essential for De Vries. Werkman describes how the fundamental discussion about the nature of moral action has bearing on the understanding of weal and woe. Illustrating her case by an analysis of the debate on organ donation, Werkman shows that the moral relevance of weal is an entirely different one than the moral relevance of woe. The chapter concludes with a critical reappraisal of the questions: The moral relevance of weal and woe may not be the most interesting issue. The more promising question is the biographical one: How do the lived and reflected experiences illuminate the way we deal with moral questions in society.

Johan Bouwer inquires about the non-religious and non-Christian views of health and illness pertinent to our health care system. He proceeds from the notion that the referential value of health and illness with regard to salvation and damnation has changed in time. Bouwer claims that our health care system itself has gained salvific value, because of the striking parallels with a religious system itself. The leading question of his contribution is: "To what extent can we relate the concepts

of health and illness as used in our time to the notions of salvation and damnation?’ His effort then is to investigate how the structure of salvation – phenomenologically speaking – is present in views of health and illness, and whether their metaphorical use shed light upon the subject matter. For that purpose, he analyses the critique of the WHO definition of health, on the one hand, and of the concepts related to negative bodily experiences. He distinguishes between disease (the doctor’s perspective), illness (the patient’s perspective), and sickness (society’s perspective) – on the other hand. In exploring the prevailing metaphors, Bouwer finds little connection between health and salvation as a construct for ultimate meaning. However, health surely has salvific significance due to its referential and symbolic use and the normative weight given to it by society. With regard to ‘unwellness’, he finds that the metaphorical use of ‘disease’ is rather technical. Only in the case of illness (the patient’s perspective) metaphors are related to evil (e.g., ‘the plague’), but they do not bear the weight of concepts like damnation.

In a concluding chapter, *Heye Heyen* takes up this theme of health, healing, and salvation, and brings us full circle to the theme of Evert Jonker’s opening chapter: exploring the concepts of salvation and evil. He takes the case of ‘conditional promises of healing’ as they are found in for example Pentecostal circles. If the promised healing does not take place, even stronger negative interpretations are given. Other cases are found in psychotherapy and medicine. In all these cases Heyen finds something like Bouwer’s title: No salvation without healing. With respect to these cases, Heyen poses the critical question whether such an identification of healing and salvation leaves any room for contingency and imperfection. This might bring us back to the search for Christian messages about a salvation that does not coincide with happiness, healing, or perfection.

The chapters together explore the many meanings of salvation/shalom and the intricacies of the salvation-biography connection. Although the sequence of the chapters features a logical flow, at many places the authors of the chapters touch upon topics discussed in other chapters. Several central interactions thus come to the fore:

- between weal and woe and their respective semantic neighbors (Jonker, Bouwer)
- between biography and life course (De Lange, Ganzevoort)
- between weal/woe and biography (Ganzevoort, Werkman)
- between the individual and the Christian tradition (Jonker, Heyen, Schaap-Jonker, De Vries, Roukema-Koning)
- between the Christian tradition and the surrounding culture (De Lange)
- between Christian and secular interpretations (Jonker, Ganzevoort, Bouwer, Heyen)

The reader is invited to join us in these explorations. We anticipate critical questions like whether in these explorations we may have defined weal and woe too much as contrary concepts, in spite of the outcomes of our preliminary inquiry. Other questions might regard the ways the various discourses are connected in these chapters. We have not tried to preclude these critical questions, because critical response is what we hope for. The explorations offered in this volume are brought together with the explicit intention of provoking further discussion.

Kampen, November 2004