

<b>Institution: University of Wales, Trinity Saint David</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 33</b>
<b>Title of case study:</b> Theology, Art and Religion in Contemporary European <i>Avant-Garde</i> Culture
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>Collaboration with Christoph Schlingensief, a leading representative of contemporary 'Avant-Garde' Art and Culture which has focused on the visibility of Christian faith in the public space and is changing the perception of academic theology in the context of contemporary debates on art and culture.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>In the last five years Professor Johannes Hoff has carried out research projects at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David on 'Post-modernity, Globalisation and the Return of Apophatic Theology' as well as work exploring the end of the Romantic concept of 'art as religion'. This is related to his published research on post-modernity and the work of the medieval scholar Nicholas of Cusa, and it explores the way in which Cusa, in collaboration with the north Burgundy artists Jan Van Eyck and Rogier Van der Weyden, developed an alternative version of modernity that built on the Gothic tradition. His essays on Hugo Ball ('Bürger – Künstler – Exorzisten'), on Michel de Certeau and Henri de Lubac ('Mysticism, Ecclesiology and the Body of Christ') and on the modern philosophy of 'the event' ('Das Paradox des Glaubens und der Holzweg moderner Entscheidungslogik') were part of this project, their main aim being to develop a radical critique of modern theology's usually defensive response to globalization. This response builds on pre-modern sources, including those of Cusa and Thomas Aquinas, without abandoning the achievements of modernity. Among the themes developed are 'performativity' and the 'authentic act' in Kierkegaard, as well as the relationship between science, art and religion. A particular focus is the development of an iconoclastic (i.e. radical apophatic) concept of God, and the deconstruction of the modern 'virtualisation' of the idea of salvation in art and religion. The outcome of this research is summarized in Hoff's monograph <i>The Analogical Turn. Re-thinking modernity with Nicholas of Cusa</i> (2013) which is considered to be 'by far the most important work of recent theology and at last a real German contribution to international theological debates of our time' (John Milbank). The research moves beyond traditional orthodox narratives in that it radicalizes their most elementary iconoclastic features and focuses on the inconceivability and 'namelessness' of God.</p> <p>Hoff has also worked with the German interdisciplinary research group 'Rhetorik als Kulturelle Praxis' under the direction of the Peter Szondi Institute for General and Comparative Literary Sciences (Free University of Berlin) and the Department of Literary Sciences of the University of Konstanz. His research centres on Kierkegaard and the modern cult of 'the event' as well as spirituality and performativity in the work of the Dadaist Hugo Ball. He links Ball's findings on psychoanalysis and the tradition of pre-modernity (published in his 1927 essay 'Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit') with his own research on Christian orthodoxy and psychoanalysis, themes which Hoff has explored through collaborative research with the cognitive psychologist Peter Hampson. Hoff is continuing this project through his ongoing translation of Hugo Ball's <i>Das Byzantinische Christentum</i> (1923) in collaboration with the Zürich 'Cabaret Voltaire' and the Slovenian Artist collective IRWIN. IRWIN is recognized for its attempts to deconstruct the <i>avant-garde</i> tradition of the twentieth century, this being an underlying theme in all of Hoff's academic work.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b></p> <p>i. <i>The Analogical Turn. Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 236 pp.</p> <p>ii. 'Bürger, Künstler, Exorzisten. Wissenschaft, Kunst und Kult in den Spuren Hugo Balls' in <i>Kultur &amp; Gespenster</i> 13 (2012), pp. 25-48.</p> <p>iii. 'Leben in Fülle. Schlingensiefs Dekonstruktion der (Post-)Moderne', in Susanne Gaensheimer</p>

(ed.), *Deutscher Pavillon 2011*. 54. Internationale Kunstausstellung La Biennale Di Venezia, Venedig (Kiwi 2011, pp. 213-223); English version, 'Life in Abundance: Schlingensief's Deconstruction of (Post-)Modernism', in Susanne Gaensheimer (ed.), *German Pavilion, 2011*. 54th International Art Exhibition La Biennale Di Venezia, Venice (Sternberg Press 2011, pp. 215-25).

iv. P. J. Hampson and J. Hoff, 'Whose self? Which unification? Augustine's anthropology and the psychology-theology debate', *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010), pp. 546-66.

v. 'Das Paradox des Glaubens und der Holzweg moderner Entscheidungslogik. Kierkegaards Lektüre von Genesis 22 und ihre Wirkungsgeschichte von Heidegger bis Derrida und darüber hinaus' in H. Hoving, Julia Knop, Thomas Böhm (eds) *Die Bindung Isaaks. Stimme, Schrift, Bild* (Paderborn; Schöningh, 2009), pp. 238-58.

vi. 'Die sich selbst zurücknehmende Inszenierung von Reden und Schweigen. Zur mystagogischen Rhetorik des Nikolaus von Kues', in Holt Meyer and Dirk Uffelmann (eds) *Religion und Rhetorik. Entwicklungen und Paradoxien ihrer unvermeidlichen Allianz, Religionswissenschaft heute* (Stuttgart; Kohlhammer, 2007), pp. 222-36.

#### Reviews:

**John Milbank. University of Nottingham.** *The Analogical Turn* by Johannes Hoff for the first time locates Nicholas of Cusa without anachronism as a post-nominalist realist, who reworked the inherited analogical vision of Christian theology in a simultaneously late Gothic and Renaissance manner. As Hoff explains, this idiom offers us a new way forward today. Much more than a monograph on a historical figure, this imaginatively crafted and extremely scholarly volume constitutes one of the most significant works of theology in the twenty-first century so far. I believe that it will exert a very considerable influence on future theoretical reflections both within theology and without.

**Karsten Harries. Yale University.** With *The Analogical Turn: Rethinking Modernity* with Nicholas of Cusa Johannes Hoff has given us the most challenging and most readable book on the fifteenth-century cardinal to have appeared in English. But, as the title suggests, at issue is much more -- the shape and fate of our modern world. Recently there has been much talk about this being a postmodern, postsecular age. Hoff's book should make such talk more thoughtful.

#### 4. Details of the impact

In post-unification Germany the late Catholic artist, film maker, theatre director and actor Christoph Schlingensief (1960-2010) was considered one of the country's key cultural figures. According to the Nobel Prize laureate Elfriede Jelinek, Schlingensief was 'one of the greatest artists who ever lived' and, in recognition of his importance, much of his estate was entrusted to the Berlin Academy of the Arts. His principal themes, namely the question of God, redemption and the meaning of art, have shaped the cultural and political discourse in Germany for more than two decades, and during the latter part of his life were developed in explicit dialogue with Hoff. Following diagnosis with lung cancer in 2008, these aspects of his work became pronounced as seen in his *Heaven Could Not Be as Beautiful as Here: A Cancer Diary* (2009) (cf. obituaries *Spiegel Online International* 23 August 2010; *The Guardian* 24 August 2010, *New York Times*, 26 August 2010). Upon publication of the diary Hoff embarked upon an intensive collaboration with Schlingensief, the impact of which contributed to the visibility of Christian faith in the German public space and changed the perception of academic theology in the context of contemporary debates on art and culture.

Hoff's collaboration fed into Schlingensief's series of public high profile performances, including the acclaimed staging of his oratorio 'Eine Kirche der Angst vor dem Fremden in mir' at the 2011 Venice Biennale, and his opera 'Mea Culpa' at the Vienna Burgtheater (see [http://www.schlingensief.com/index\\_eng.html](http://www.schlingensief.com/index_eng.html).) In each the author enacted his own cancer experience and discussed, from a Catholic perspective, the religious questions that his imminent mortality raised. Through this collaboration, which made a significant contribution to the public perception of the artist's work, Hoff's scholarship had an impact well beyond the academic community. By influencing the creative practice of a leading artist during a critical juncture of his

development, Hoff's research has promoted new forms of artistic and religious expression which have enriched the lives, imaginations and sensibilities of individuals and groups.

The impact of Hoff's collaboration is best seen in relation to Schlingensiefel's production, 'Sterben Lernen' ('Learning to Die') (see <http://www.srf.ch/sendungen/reflexe/sterben-lernen-mit-christoph-schlingensiefel-2>). This emerged from an initial meeting in which Hoff presented Schlingensiefel with his account of Cusa's deconstruction of narcissistic habits and 'virtual reality', typified in the Christian concept of heaven which in turn became the basis for the title of Schlingensiefel's *Heaven Could Not Be as Beautiful as Here*. His ongoing dialogue with Hoff was shared with his audience during a public reading of the diary in the Thalia Theatre, Hamburg. The discourse articulated two arguments which form the core of Hoff's text. It interprets modernity as the 'age of narcissism' and criticizes the modern obsession with 'virtual reality' or the will to visualise what he saw as the ultimately ineffable nature of faith ('Kämpfe gegen die katholische Bildersoße'). Based on audio records, this presentation has been published in Schlingensiefel's posthumous autobiography (Aino Laberenz (ed.), *Christoph Schlingensiefel. Ich weiß ich wars* (München: KiWi, 2012) especially p. 56), while the later chapters include further material based on the early dialogues. The collaboration subsequently developed with Schlingensiefel's production 'Sterben Lernen' at the Theater Neumarkt in Zürich, first performed on 4 December 2009. The treatment of the themes of God, church and existential suffering explored in 'Sterben Lernen' were in response to Hoff's analysis of Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa. The author recounts Hoff's role as a 'Sterbelehrer' ('a-teacher-of-how-to-die') in his controversial 'Schlingenblog'. 'This', he claims, 'is precisely not the repetition of a medical history but is about the struggle with and for god and about the ideas that emerged in the conversation with the systematic theologian Johannes Hoff. The questions of god, the hope to find a new peace, not according to the conventional notions of the Evangelical or Catholic Church, but in liberation from human delusion towards the reality of the ineffable God'. In the fourth act of 'Sterben Lernen', Schlingensiefel interrupted his own performance on stage in order to talk about his collaboration with Hoff. This particular staging was followed by a panel discussion with Schlingensiefel, Carl Hegemann and Hoff himself in which these themes were further articulated.

Hoff's further collaboration included preparatory work on Schlingensiefel's celebrated 'Operndorf Afrika' project in Ouagadougou, the capital of the west African state of Burkina Faso. His input included a feature article entitled 'The Performance Artist Saint Augustine' in the 'Schlingensiefel-Feuilleton' (4, 5). This appeared in the Christmas edition of the German weekly *Die Zeit* in 2009 (6). With a circulation of 488,036 and an estimated readership of two million, it is the most widely read German weekly newspaper. This article drew on Hoff's academic publication on Augustine ('Whose self? Which unification? Augustine's anthropology and the psychology-theology debate', *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010)), his previous research on Jacques Derrida (*Spiritualität und Sprachverlust. Theologie nach Foucault und Derrida* (Paderborn: München, 1999)) and his collaboration with the interdisciplinary Research Group 'Rhetorik als Kulturelle Praxis'. Other contributors included the former German President Joachim Köhler, the award-winning African architect Francis Kéré, the American singer songwriter Patti Smith and the Swedish dramatist Henning Mankell. Profits were directed to 'Operndorf Afrika' itself while the work drew public attention to the artistic project. (See the 20:00 'Tagesthemen' ('Review of the Day') broadcast by the German television station ARD on 19 December 2010 (9)). After the BBC, ARD is the world's largest public broadcaster, its programmes reaching 8.8 million households in Germany.

The impact of Hoff's collaboration with the artist continued after Schlingensiefel's death when the jury of the 54th Venice Biennale awarded the 'Golden Lion for the best national pavilion' (the exhibition's highest honour) to Schlingensiefel's posthumously staged oratorio 'Kirche der Angst' ('Church of Fear') (see <http://www.kirche-der-angst>). Along with Dr Susanne Gaensheimer, director of Frankfurt's *Museum für Moderne Kunst* and curator of the Biennale's German Pavilion, Hoff was involved in the preparatory discussions about this project. According to Schlingensiefel's colleague Carl Hegemann (Dramaturg, Thalia Theater Hamburg), Hoff's contributions to the planning of the Pavilion had a significant impact on the presentation of the oratorio as a specifically religious work. The Biennale attracts over 300,000 visitors, while the German Pavilion and Schlingensiefel's work was credited as an exemplar of how contemporary art can be cutting-edge and morally engaged at

the same time (see <http://www.deutscher-pavillon.org>). As there are few translations, subtitles or English versions of Schlingensief's complex oeuvre, the Pavilion made it accessible to an international audience. (For the public responses to this event cf. 'DW Akademie and National Catholic Register 9,10). The accompanying publication, which is aimed at helping visitors to contextualise their experience, includes Hoff's essay 'Leben in Fülle. Schlingensief's Dekonstruktion der (Post-)Moderne' (English translation 10) in which he recounts his final conversation with Schlingensief, a discussion of narcissistic images and the illusionary salvation in modern religion and art. This rejects the traditional *avant-garde* reading of Schlingensief's art and relates it to the pre-modern tradition of philosophical theology such as Meister Eckhart and Thomas Aquinas. Hoff was subsequently involved in the Saint Moritz Art Festival 2010 where he wrote the feature article of the accompanying journal. The festival's conference, organized by the German art theorist Bazon Brock, afforded Hoff the opportunity to present his research on Hugo Ball and, together with Carl Hegemann, to participate in public discussion on Schlingensief's work at the *Volksbühne Berlin* and at the Berlin *Hebbel Theater am Ufer*.

The impact of Hoff's collaboration with Schlingensief, and particularly of his research on modern art as religion, continued with his invitation to the Wagner-Council at the *Akademie der Künste* in Berlin, May 2011, and to act as critical advisor for Sebastian Baumgartner's critically acclaimed staging of *Tannhäuser* at the Bayreuth Festival. In 2004 at the invitation of Wolfgang and Katharina Wagner, Schlingensief had staged Richard Wagner's *Parsifal* for the Bayreuth Festival. Hoff's research fed into later discussions regarding art and religious themes in the opera. Following its first performance, Hoff participated in the 'Tannhäuser – Werkstatt der Gefühl' symposium in Bayreuth. This annual conference of artists and scholars re-establishes a suggestion made initially by Friedrich Nietzsche, whose relationship to Wagner and Schlingensief is explored in Hoff's Pavilion essay.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Schlingensief repeatedly referred to his collaboration with Hoff in public interviews, for example in his 2009 interview with Cultural Journal Cicero (1), his 2009 television interview with *Die Zeit* (2), and in footage of 'Sterben Lernen' Akt 4 (3)

1. <http://www.cicero.de/salon/die-kirche-ist-ein-m%C3%A4rchenpark/40447>
2. [http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2009-12/schlingensief\\_181209\\_2](http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2009-12/schlingensief_181209_2)
3. <http://schlingenblog.posterous.com/?page=5>

The collaboration is also corroborated in the various sources referenced above:

4. <http://www.zeit.de/2009/53/Schlingensief-Christentum/komplettansicht>
5. <http://www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2009-12/bg-schlingensief-2>
6. <http://www.sternberg-press.com/?pageld=1313&PHPSESSID=f7cf4357c5d13d5569fe00024f492021>
7. <http://www.schlingensief.com/weblog/?p=626>

8. Aino Laberenz (ed.), 'Christoph Schlingensief. Ich weiß ich war's' (München: KiWi, 2012) see particularly pp. 54ff. and the acknowledgement at the end of the book; (the e-mails included in the book can be made available to the REF Panel).

9. <http://www.schlingensief.com/weblog/index.php?p=464>

### Contacts:

10. Dramaturg, Thalia Theater Hamburg.
11. Director, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt
12. Cabaret Voltaire, Zürich