

How to Read the First Epistle of John Non-Polemically

While the title may sound strange, most exegetes would agree that the First Epistle of John is a polemical text. Yet, can a polemical text be read non-polemically? As we shall see, many exegetical difficulties are linked with a polemical determination of 1 John. I would go so far as to say that since the polemical character of 1 John has been seen as the key to many exegetical issues of 1 John, the non-polemical approach can provide new solutions to most of them. Further, I argue that, in the case of 1 John, polemics or non-polemics is not a question of one's desire for peace, but a question of the text. In many points the non-polemical approach is much closer to the text than a polemical reading. In the context of the dominance of polemical readings "How to Read 1 John Non-Polemically" is a real question. What follows is not a recipe for the most adequate approach to 1 John, albeit an approach to the text that will challenge some agreements of Johannine scholarship.

I. Polemical and Non-Polemical Readings of 1 John

1. *The Traditional Polemical Paradigm*

The exegesis of 1 John is, in most cases, dominated by the question of the opponents. There is, however, a lot of dissent in the ongoing historical debate about the opponents. But looking at the hermeneutical basis of the current approaches, one can claim that, despite all their discord, the majority of readings and commentaries of 1 John agree on four points:

(1) A basic assumption for them is that in a more or less mirror-like reading, it is possible to reconstruct who the opponents were and what actually happened in the Johannine community⁽¹⁾. Therefore, the text

⁽¹⁾ A typical representative for this is R.E. Brown, who reads 1 John as "the record of a theological life-and-death struggle within a community at the end of the first century" (R.E. BROWN, *The Epistles of John* [AncB 30; Garden City, NY 1982] x). The question about the identity of the opponents is asked by BROWN, *Epistles*, 55 and by J. BEUTLER, *Die Johannesbriefe* (RNT; Regensburg 2000) 22; H.-J. KLAUCK, *Der erste Johannesbrief* (EKKNT 23/1; Zürich 1991) 35; C.G. KRUSE, *The Letters of John* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand

of 1 John serves as a window for the world behind, representing one stage of the history of the Johannine community.

(2) On the other hand, the opponents and the conflict between them and the orthodox Johannine community serve as a hermeneutical key to the text, which is nearly always interpreted in the light of the opponents⁽²⁾.

(3) Therefore, not only are 2,18-27; 4,1-6 defined as opponent texts, but also many other slogans and verses are viewed in relation to the opponents. Among these verses are 1,6.8.10; 2,4.6.9; 4,20; 5,6-8⁽³⁾, where contradictory statements as to sin (1,8 versus 3,6.9; 5,18) are seen as a reflection of the opponents' position⁽⁴⁾, the sin unto death (5,16.17) is viewed as referring to the opponents⁽⁵⁾ and the whole ethical parenthesis is understood as a response to them guaranteeing the community's cohesion⁽⁶⁾.

(4) Altogether, the polemical function of 1 John is stressed, which is considered as a text greatly determined by its original situation, even by authors who view the Gospel of John more generally⁽⁷⁾. Though being addressed to the Johannine community, 1 John is seen as a part of the struggle against the hostile influence of the opponents.

Rapids 2000) 15-28; D. RENSBERGER, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville 1997) 21-25; G. STRECKER, *Die Johannesbriefe* (KEK 14; Göttingen 1989) 132.

(2) This is evident not only in R.E. Brown's writings, but in most commentaries on 1 John.

(3) E.g. BROWN, *Epistles*, 47-49 passim; KRUSE, *Letters*, 16-17; J. PAINTER, "The 'Opponents' in 1 John", *NTS* 32 (1986) 48-71 (54-64).

(4) KLAUCK, *1. Johannesbrief*, 197-198.

(5) E.g. BROWN, *Epistles*, 617-618; K. GRAYSTON, *The Johannine Epistles* (NCBC; Grand Rapids 1984) 144; RENSBERGER, *1-3 John*, 140.

(6) U.C. VAN WAHLDE, *The Johannine Commandments. 1 John and the Struggle for the Johannine Tradition* (Theological Inquiries; New York 1990) especially 105-137; R.A. WHITACRE, *Johannine Polemic. The Role of Tradition and Theology* (SBLDS 67; Chico, CA 1982) 133-140.

(7) The traditional diachronic readings of John read it also polemically and as a record of the conflicts the community was confronted with. This polemical reading of John is still widespread in R.E. Brown's exegesis (BROWN, *Epistles*, 92 passim; ID., *The Gospel according to John* [AncB 29; New York 1966] I, XXXIV-XXXIX). Elsewhere, there is a tendency to read John more generally, but not 1 John. This is the case in K. SCHOLTISSEK, *In ihm sein und bleiben. Die Sprache der Immanenz in den johanneischen Schriften* (Herders Biblische Studien 21; Freiburg 2000) 364 (John) respectively 340-343 (1 John); O. SCHWANKL, *Licht und Finsternis. Ein metaphorisches Paradigma in den johanneischen Schriften* (Herders Biblische Studien 5; Freiburg 1995) 281-287.

The readings based on these four suppositions can be called polemical. For polemical readings it is characteristic that they consider 1 John as rooted in a polemical dispute. Consequently, the text of 1 John, which is read in a polemical context, is understood as a response or (counter-)attack to someone *vis-à-vis*. Thus, the text model is that of a circle leading from the text to the history of the Johannine community and back to the text.

Beyond these four points of assent there is a lot of disagreement among various polemical readings as to what exactly happened in the Johannine community and what exactly the semantic position of the opponents was⁽⁸⁾. I could add another reconstruction to this wide panorama of already existing research. But the far-reaching disagreement can also make one sceptical and lead one to ask if the hermeneutical presuppositions of such a procedure contribute to progress.

2. Non-Polemical Approaches and Their Deficiencies

The starting point for non-polemical readings is the question whether or not the opponents have been overemphasized by many authors and what their status in 1 John actually is. From these critical questions methodological alternatives arise that emphasize the literary character of 1 John and thus see the opponents in a different light. Hence, we can define a reading that does not read 1 John as a polemical text, but as an entity in itself, as non-polemical. In such a reading, even if polemical elements occur, their function is seen as internal.

Non-polemical readings of 1 John are not popular at all. Many authors who do not adhere to them do not even mention them⁽⁹⁾. But, to take the discussion seriously, this silence can no longer be maintained. Therefore, I now want to present briefly the three existing approaches and ask, if they are able to cope with the difficulties underlying the polemical approaches:

The first author to take steps in this direction was J.M. Lieu⁽¹⁰⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ KLAUCK, *1. Johannesbrief*, 34-43.

⁽⁹⁾ A positive exception is R.B. EDWARDS, *The Johannine Epistles* (New Testament Guides; Sheffield 1996) 64-67 who admits: "the polemical character of 1 John has been exaggerated" (64). KRUSE, *Letters*, 16, n. 23, mentions the approach, but does not consider its content at all.

⁽¹⁰⁾ J.M. LIEU, "'Authority to Become Children of God'. A Study of 1 John", *NovT* 23 (1981) 210-228; ID., *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge 1991).

She challenges the approach that takes for self-evident 1 John's character as "a fundamentally polemical writing"⁽¹¹⁾, which, according to Lieu, is an attribution of modern scholars and not of the text itself⁽¹²⁾. She proposes a reading "without immediate and prior reference to the views of its opponents"⁽¹³⁾. Her approach is not general, but sets a different emphasis: "its [1 John's] purpose is not first of all to engage in polemic with outsiders"⁽¹⁴⁾. For Lieu the ethical debate of 1 John is not primarily directed against opponents. Thus, the chief method of Lieu's reading is to separate clearly the ethical debate from the christological debate linked with the opponents. What remains unclear, however, is the exact link between the two debates, as the suspicion arises that Lieu does not follow her strategy of separation consistently⁽¹⁵⁾. Moreover, Lieu challenges the polemical reading from the text of 1 John itself, not from a hermeneutical and an epistemological reflection. So the questions of if and what reconstructions are possible and what role they should play when interpreting 1 John are not fully answered.

T. Griffith was the first scholar to use the term "non-polemical" by proposing "a pastoral rather than a polemical outlook"⁽¹⁶⁾ on 1 John. He continues developing Lieu's thesis about the limited range of opponent texts in 1 John and proves the non-polemical character of the slogans in 1,6.8.10; 2,4.6.9; 4,20 with the help of analogies from secular Greek literature and philosophical debates. He aspires to demonstrate that both the ethical and the christological debate "can be explained without reference to what the group that has left the Johannine community (2,19) positively believes"⁽¹⁷⁾. Nevertheless, he

⁽¹¹⁾ LIEU, "Authority", 212. Hence she claims, "polemics are subordinate to the author's main interest in his readers and the assurance they have" (214-215).

⁽¹²⁾ LIEU, "Authority", 216.

⁽¹³⁾ LIEU, *Theology*, 16.

⁽¹⁴⁾ LIEU, *Theology*, 22.

⁽¹⁵⁾ LIEU, "Authority", 224, where she states with regard to the opponents: "their departure may well have been related to these moral issues". See also LIEU, *Theology*, 106, where she describes love and faith as "inseparable", but does not deepen this thesis. Thereby she underestimates the thematic hierarchy in 1 John and the distribution of the two thematical accents on John and 1 John (see my solution below in III.2 and III.3).

⁽¹⁶⁾ T. GRIFFITH, "A Non-Polemical Reading of 1 John", *TynB* 49 (1998) 253-276 (255, also 275). Cf. also ID., *Keep yourselves from idols. A new look at 1 John* (JSNTSS 233; Sheffield 2002) 108 and 119.

⁽¹⁷⁾ GRIFFITH, "Reading", 253. Cf. also ID., *Keep yourselves from idols*, 118-124.

clearly speaks of a “background”⁽¹⁸⁾ and the tendency of “a group of Johannine Christians to revert to Judaism”⁽¹⁹⁾, thereby locating the schism in the process of the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism. To be sure, he plays down the polemical character, but judged critically, his proposal is not as new as one might expect from the title of his paper. While most polemical readings view the text as an internal reassurance of the community facing a certain conflict, Griffith just chooses one of these conflicts — thereby adopting a position shared by many authors before him⁽²⁰⁾ — and so partly falls back into polemical dimensions⁽²¹⁾. Therefore, how does the background help if it cannot be reconstructed and functions merely as a dark cipher?

Let us proceed, then, to the author who is more radical in this respect: D. Neufeld⁽²²⁾. He strongly criticizes the vague and contradictory reconstructions of many authors and comes to the conclusion that “to establish the meaning and significance of the texts on these tentative proposals should not be our starting point”. By contrast, his thesis is “that the author in an imaginative and creative outburst created a linguistic context of an apocalyptic type in which the boasts, confessions, and denials make sense”⁽²³⁾. Thus, Neufeld is the first who leaves speculations about the history of the Johannine

⁽¹⁸⁾ GRIFFITH, “Reading”, 275.

⁽¹⁹⁾ GRIFFITH, “Reading”, 269. Similarly ID., *Keep yourselves from idols*, 174-179.

⁽²⁰⁾ A pioneer in this was A. WURM, *Die Irrlehrer im ersten Johannesbrief* (BibS[F] 8,1; Freiburg 1903). Others who picked up this idea were L. SCHENKE, “The Johannine Schism and the Twelve”, *Critical Readings of John 6* (ed. R.A. CULPEPPER) (Biblical Interpretation Series 22; Leiden 1997) 205-219 (206-207); H. THYEN, “Johannesbriefe”, *TRE* 17 (1988) 186-200 (193-194). This thesis is again countered by W. UEBELE, “*Viele Verführer sind in die Welt ausgegangen*”. Die Gegner in den Briefen des Ignatius von Antiochien und in den Johannesbriefen (BWANT 151; Stuttgart 2001) 134.

⁽²¹⁾ Similar to Griffith’s approach is that of J.V. HILLS, “Sin Is Lawlessness (1 John 3:4)”, *Common Life in the Early Church*. Essays Honoring Graydon F. Snyder (eds. J.V. HILLS – R.B. GARDNER) (Harrisburg, PA 1998) 286-299, who stresses the perspective of 1 John 3 as “communal self-definition”, but does not extend this thesis to 1 John 2. Consequently he describes the genre of 1 John as community order (J.V. HILLS, “A Genre for 1 John”, *The Future of Early Christianity*. Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester [eds. B.A. PEARSON – A.T. KRAABEL] [Minneapolis 1991] 367-377).

⁽²²⁾ D. NEUFELD, *Reconceiving Texts as Speech Acts*. An Analysis of 1 John (Biblical Interpretation Series 7; Leiden 1994).

⁽²³⁾ NEUFELD, *Speech Acts*, 133.

community behind and restricts himself to a purely literary level. His theoretical presumptions (mainly speech act theory) cannot be discussed here⁽²⁴⁾. From a non-polemical view his explanation of the antithetical statements and the depicted schism as warnings to the reader is convincing⁽²⁵⁾. But it is interesting to see, that contrary to Lieu and Griffith, Neufeld still adheres to the traditional range of verses seen as reflections of the opponents, thus considering 1,6.8.10; 2,4.6.9; 4,20 as slogans of hypothetical opponents. The traditional link of christological and ethical deficiency on the opponent's side remains, so that the polemical character and the over-emphasis on the opponents is shifted from a historical level to a hypothetical level. The relationship of faith and love, of self-definition and foe-devaluation can therefore not be described sufficiently in Neufeld's reading. What makes these deficiencies still more evident, is that Neufeld does not take into account the intertextual links with the Gospel of John, which also need a non-polemical explanation.

Looking back, how far are these authors able to solve the problems concomitant with the polemical readings? In what respect do the problems remain unsolved? To sum up, either (in Neufeld's case) the question of the range of opponent texts is not satisfyingly solved, or (in Lieu's and Griffith's case) the hermeneutical and epistemological reflection is missing or only weakly developed. The approaches are sometimes too vague and inconsistent, sometimes (like Neufeld) radical, yet, at the same time, he still transports presumptions of the polemical approach.

Therefore, I would like to propose a non-polemical reading that is more consistent⁽²⁶⁾. Some of the mentioned inconsistencies can be overcome with a text model based on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and intertextuality, which are the two pillars of my reading. I shall proceed in two steps: first, I will explain the hermeneutical and theoretical implications of the reading. Then, I will outline my reading of 1 John.

⁽²⁴⁾ My main point of criticism is that Neufeld bases his analysis merely on speech act theory and thus on the author and not on the reader. Consequently, he puts too little emphasis on the openness of 1 John and always mentions its compelling character. The only permissible reader's reaction is "acceptance" (NEUFELD, *Speech Acts*, 80). A reader response analysis can amend Neufeld's unilateral approach.

⁽²⁵⁾ NEUFELD, *Speech Acts*, 95, 134 passim.

⁽²⁶⁾ H. SCHMID, *Gegner im 1. Johannesbrief? Zu Konstruktion und Selbstreferenz im johanneischen Sinnsystem* (BWANT 159; Stuttgart 2002).

II. The ‘Johannine System’ as a Hermeneutical Basis

1. *Intertextuality and the Relationship of the Johannine Writings*

For most readings of 1 John the relationship with the Gospel of John (John) is central. This is no wonder, as the two texts are very closely related with respect to content, vocabulary, and style. Their relationship is determined polemically by most authors considering 1 John as a counterattack against an unorthodox interpretation of John⁽²⁷⁾. The alternative (and less popular) position claims that 1 John is the older document and John constitutes an elaboration of the epistle’s kerygma⁽²⁸⁾. Both positions have convincing arguments to support them. What they have in common is that they are based on a particular thesis about the order of the composition of John and 1 John and that each of the two texts is linked with events in the history of the Johannine community so that this history forms the bond between the two texts. When I propose an intertextual model at this point, it is not one of universal intertextuality⁽²⁹⁾, but one restricted to the Johannine writings as a privileged space for intertextual relations. Hence, intertextuality functions as a means to describe the relationship of John and 1 John.

My thesis is that it is not only virtually impossible to trace the bridges between text and history (as will be argued in 2.2.), but also impossible to prove which of the two texts was written before the other. As an example, we may consider John 6,60-71 and 1 John 2,18-27. The close relationship between these two texts has been seen by several authors⁽³⁰⁾. Whereas in John the departure of some of the disciples and Peter’s confession is narrated step by step, in 1 John the narrative elements are reduced to a minimum. 1 John uses the narrative flashback on the schism (2,19) as a peg for reflections on the importance of the christological confession and remaining with the community (2,20-27). Both texts have their specific accents; for example, John 6,60-71, in giving the reader the choice to remain (like

⁽²⁷⁾ BROWN, *Epistles*, 91 passim; KLAUCK, *1. Johannesbrief*, 33; UEBELE, *Verführer*, 118.

⁽²⁸⁾ GRAYSTON, *Epistles*, 12-14.

⁽²⁹⁾ Like J. KRISTEVA, *Semeiotike. Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris 1969).

⁽³⁰⁾ SCHENKE, “Schism”. For a continuation of Schenke’s approach see SCHMID, *Gegner*, 114-125.

Peter and the twelve) or to leave (like many of Jesus' disciples), is pragmatically more open than 1 John 2,18-27, where this choice no longer exists and it is clear on which side the reader stands (e.g. 2,20.24.27). The climax of John 6,60-71 is Peter's exemplary confession (6,68.69) and thus an individual model, whereas in 1 John the adequate christological confession is a general *conditio sine qua non*. The two texts constitute a narrative of and a reflection on the christological border-crossing. Not remaining within the community (1 John) corresponds to no longer walking with Jesus (John). The reader of John following Jesus finds support in the clear encouragement in 1 John 2,18-27, whereas the reader of 1 John will find a pragmatic key in Peter's question in John 6,69 and in his positive example. Therefore, the intertextual relationship of the two texts is not necessarily a temporal one: one might begin telling the story and then add reflections, but one might also extend the reflection into a story which is located within Jesus' journey with his disciples. The differences in the two texts are not due to the date of composition of the text but due to perspective and genre, and both reading-directions are possible.

Thus, I propose an intertextual model constructed from the implicit reader's perspective which combines elements of intertextuality with reader response criticism⁽³¹⁾. Intertextuality is often seen from the author's perspective. But the less declared the intertextual relations are, the more they are the reader's affair⁽³²⁾. This is the case with the Johannine writings, as there is no quotation of John in 1 John or vice versa and no explicit intertextual marker in John or 1 John. The intertextual reader can thus start reading John and proceed to 1 John, or he or she can start reading 1 John and proceed to John. Either text receives an amplified meaning when it is read in the light of the other. Therefore, their relationship can be described as complementary, and the link between them is seen in the reading-process.

Essential for the special intertextual relationship of 1 John and John is the fact that the function of the two texts is different in each case: Whereas John introduces the reader to encountering stories about

⁽³¹⁾ S. HOLTHUIS, *Intertextualität*. Aspekte einer rezeptionsorientierten Konzeption (Tübingen 1993) 225.

⁽³²⁾ G. GENETTE, *Palimpsestes*. La littérature au second degré (Paris 1982) 16. As Genette's concept deals only with massively declared intertextuality and with texts in a clearly temporal relationship (14, 433-434), it is not very helpful for the relationship of John and 1 John.

Jesus and can function as a missionary tract⁽³³⁾, 1 John requires the reader's knowledge about the christological kerygma and develops ethical instruction on this basis (this thesis is further elaborated in III.2.). Constituting one of the two basic texts of this system, 1 John is of equal value and complementary to the Gospel of John and not just a 'situative' intervention into a conflict of the Johannine community. Many of the differences between the two texts can be explained by their *Textsortendifferenz*⁽³⁴⁾ and there is no need to quote two different situations underlying them. Whether the Gospel or 1 John was written first is not relevant from the implicit reader's perspective as both reading directions are fruitful.

The intertextual readings of the two texts lead to what I call the "Johannine system"⁽³⁵⁾. It is not the sum of the two texts but the result of a permanent intertextual reading-circle. As the reader's intertextual construction, it can be described with the help of systems theory.

2. Systems Theory, Delimitation and Self-Construction

According to Niklas Luhmann, a system is an ordered relation of elements. This notion originally developed for social systems has been transferred to texts in literary theory and provides a good basis for a non-polemical reading of 1 John⁽³⁶⁾. A system is principally an entity in itself, the perception of which cannot be based on realism, but on constructivism⁽³⁷⁾. A system produces reality so that the pragmatic

⁽³³⁾ This position, once described as "universally rejected" (T. OKURE, *The Johannine Approach to Mission* [WUNT 31; Tübingen 1988] 10), has become more popular recently: S. MOTYER, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and "the Jews"* (Carlisle 1997) 6, 57-73, 215-216; D.A. CARSON, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester 1991) 89-92. An allusion to the missionary character of the community can be seen in the motif of "hearing us" in 1 John 4,6.

⁽³⁴⁾ THYEN, "Johannesbriefe", 191.

⁽³⁵⁾ 2 John and 3 John also belong to the Johannine system. Nevertheless, as real letters (limited addressees in 2 John 1; 3 John 1; greetings in 2 John 13; 3 John 15) and short texts they are not its basic texts. Considering the Johannine writings as a whole, one can therefore speak of a triple *Textsortendifferenz*.

⁽³⁶⁾ H. DE BERG, "Kunst kommt von Kunst. Die Luhmann-Rezeption in der Literatur- und Kunstwissenschaft", *Rezeption und Reflexion. Zur Resonanz der Systemtheorie Niklas Luhmanns außerhalb der Soziologie* (eds. H. DE BERG – S.J. SCHMIDT) (Frankfurt 2000) 175-221; J. FOHRMANN – H. MÜLLER (eds.), *Systemtheorie der Literatur* (München 1996).

⁽³⁷⁾ E. VON GLASERSFELD, "Knowing without Metaphysics: Aspects of the Radical Constructivist Position", *Research and Reflexivity* (ed. F. STEIER) (Inquiries in Social Construction; London 1991) 12-29.

aspect is central. Different topics of 1 John can therefore be seen not as related to external events, but primarily in relation to each other⁽³⁸⁾. On this basis I shall later examine the relationship of love and faith (III.2.).

Systems theory also helps to understand the phenomenon of the opponents since the core of Luhmann's systems theory is the difference between system and environment based on delimitation⁽³⁹⁾. A system comes into being by being separated from its environment and creating a difference from it:

They [systems] constitute and maintain themselves by creating and maintaining a difference from their environment, and they use their boundaries to regulate this difference. [...] In this sense boundary maintenance is system maintenance⁽⁴⁰⁾.

By boundary maintenance the system forms and maintains itself. The central question is, therefore, not how the system interacts with its environment, but how the difference is created by and treated within the system. Luhmann frequently uses the term self-reference, which can be found in all acts of the system⁽⁴¹⁾. The system speaks of its environment in its own language from which it is impossible to reconstruct the environment. Self-contact is the only form of environmental contact⁽⁴²⁾ so that the environment constitutes the system's own product: "Thus the complexity of the world neither repeats itself nor is reflected within systems. There is no depiction of the 'environment' within them"⁽⁴³⁾.

What does this mean for the opponents? They are a way for the system to speak about itself by means of a personalized delimitation. Even when 1 John speaks about opponents in the third person, this refers to the system itself. This does not mean automatically that the opponents are banned to the realm of hypothesis. There may have been opponents, but 1 John read self-referentially is not an adequate source to get to know something about them. The question is, therefore, not who the opponents were but with which purpose 1 John creates them.

⁽³⁸⁾ N. LUHMANN, *Social Systems* (trans. J. Bednarz, Jr. with D. Baecker; Stanford, CA 1995) (first German edition 1984).

⁽³⁹⁾ T. Griffith also emphasizes "the need to reinforce the limits of the Johannine community" (GRIFFITH, "Reading", 253). Luhmann's theory can provide a theoretical foundation for this accent.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ LUHMANN, *Social Systems*, 17.

⁽⁴¹⁾ LUHMANN, *Social Systems*, 33 defines self-reference as "the unity that [...] a system [...] is for itself".

⁽⁴²⁾ LUHMANN, *Social Systems*, 33.

⁽⁴³⁾ LUHMANN, *Social Systems*, 444.

The focus is thus shifted from the reconstruction of the opponents to the literary strategies of the text in its identity-making.

Delimitation is central, but considered in a different perspective than it is traditionally. In the context of the broader strategy of delimitation the function of the opponents has to be discussed in a wider perspective. The complexity of the policy of delimitation in the Johannine system becomes apparent when we consider more such personalized delimitations: the cosmos, “the Jews” and the opponents, each of which has its particular function⁽⁴⁴⁾. Thus, the opponents as a minor theme of 1 John represent one of several strategies of self-definition and delimitation within the “Johannine system”⁽⁴⁵⁾.

III. The Function of the Opponent Texts in 1 John

1. *The Opponents’ Motif and Eschatology*

Self-reference means, first of all, that everything is formulated in the system’s language or worldview. The worldview of 1 John is apocalyptic, and the fact that 1 John calls the opponents antichrists (2,18; 4,3), false prophets (4,1) and seducers (2,27) proves that their apocalyptic contextualization is central. The opponents do not stand alone, but they are one apocalyptic motif among others, representing one element of a broader eschatological scenario. Since I view them as an element within a larger inventory, not the opponents, the apocalyptic worldview is at the centre of the Johannine system. It is a worldview in which distress and salvation are close to each other⁽⁴⁶⁾.

The motif of the opponents is linked with the following apocalyptic motifs illustrating the eschatological scenario:

(1) The motif of the last hour: in 1 John this last hour is not characterized by an eschatological catastrophe, but by a christological opposition of confession and denial, of Christ and Antichrist, of truth and lie. Whereas in John the hour is a central christological concept,

⁽⁴⁴⁾ SCHMID, *Gegner*, 267-271.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ These reflections on the basis of systems theory are congruous with the rhetorical device of σύγκρισις using contrasting figures and “the foil of another life to sharpen the features of the honoree”. Generally it can be stated “that antithesis and personal opposition were integral parts of virtually all attempts of persuasion” (S. MASON [ed.], *Life of Josephus. Translation and Commentary* [Leiden 2001] xxxiv). In 1 John, the opponents are drawn as figures in contrast to the believing community.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ J.J. COLLINS, *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London 1997) 57.

the last hour as a consolidation of the widespread notion of the last day(s) (Isa 2,2; Ezek 38,1; Mic 4,1; John 6,39.40.54; 11,24; 12,48) is linked with the opposite forces. The upcoming antichrists are the sign that enables the reader to recognize the last hour (1 John 2,18). In this last hour, in spite of being endangered by the opponent's false statements (2,19), the community stands firm, as it knows the truth (2,20.21). At the same time, the last hour gives the following exhortation (2,28.29) the necessary urgency.

(2) The motif of division: the division within the community affecting even inner relations is an eschatological event (cf. 1 Cor 11,18.19). It is a sign of the last hour for which the activity of anti-divine forces is characteristic (Mark 13,5.6.22; Acts 20,9.30; 2 Thess 3,4.9.10; Jude 17.18; 2 Pet 2,1-3). By this division, which is set in the core of the community, one gains clarity about the nature of each human being⁽⁴⁷⁾ — nothing can be concealed any more (1 John 2,19).

(3) The motif of victory: the aim of the presentation of the eschatological scenario in 1 John is to strengthen the community, for the result of the eschatological fight is not open, but it is the community and the one who adheres to God who has won. The victory is not only promised, it is also proclaimed. It is the victory over the opponents (4,4) and, finally, over the whole cosmos (5,4.5), reflecting the universality of the final struggle. Due to the focus on christology in the Johannine system, it is not the victory of the just⁽⁴⁸⁾, but the victory occurs thanks to the christological confession.

(4) The motif of the two spirits: spirits are a common motif in apocalyptic literature. As in 1 John 4,6, TestXII.Jud 20,1-5 mentions δύο πνεύματα: τὸ τῆς ἀλήθειας καὶ τὸ τῆς πλάνης. The central idea in 1 John is that spirits operate within the human and can be upholders of christological confession or of christological denial. Consequently, it may happen that the evil spirit gains too much room, which constitutes one of the principal dangers for the believer. But, here again, the believer's position is clear. On the one hand, the motif of the spirits strengthens the community because it is convinced that it has received the spirit promised by Jesus (cf. 3,24; 4,13 and the promises in John 14,16.17; 14,25.26; 15,26.27; 16,7-15). On the other hand, it is an incentive to be watchful, for the reader is exhorted to discern the spirits (1 John 4,1).

⁽⁴⁷⁾ The verb φανερώω which occurs here is typically used in an eschatological context (1 John 3,2; Col 3,4; 1 Pet 5,4).

⁽⁴⁸⁾ This is the case in many early Jewish texts like 1 En 9,12; 93,3.7; 98,12; Jub 23,30; 24,29.

The apocalyptic scenario has been described as typical for the opponent texts in 1 John, where it is made concrete by an opposition of confession and denial. Now the question arises which role this scenario plays in the macro-context of 1 John. Although its function is complex, the principal function is related to the main theme of 1 John which will now be considered.

2. *Faith as a Basis for Love*

The relationship of love and faith is a central question of the Johannine system. It can be answered by both looking at the position of the opponent texts in 1 John and taking into account the intertextual dimension which results together with John. Faith and the christological issues depicted in 2,18-27; 4,1-6 are not the main topic of 1 John, but the two texts are integrated within a chain of argumentation about ethics and sin.

First, the two opponent texts function as excursuses depicting an apocalyptic scenario that urges the reader to walk in the right way with his or her deeds. The fact that it is the last hour makes the ethical exhortation more urgent and forceful. The one who does God's will remains in eternity (2,17) and therefore needs not fear the last hour. The verses 2,28.29 move again to the ethical issue, which thus frames the christological excursus in 2,18-27. This is made evident by the recurring phrase ὁ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ in 2,17 and 2,28. Likewise, verse 4,7 (following the two-spirits-scenario with christological phrases in 4,1-6) is an exhortation in the first person to love one another continuing the theme of 3,11-24.

Second, the two opponent texts operate as a basis for the ethical parenesis⁽⁴⁹⁾: having surpassed the scenario of danger, the reader returns strengthened to the ethical issues. Moreover, the main function of the two texts is not to deal with the opponents and their position, but to articulate words of encouragement to the reader so that the opponents are rather an instrument of self-assurance. This is evident again in both opponent texts: 2,20.27 stress that the reader has the "chrisma", which finally makes him or her immune to the dangers of the antichrists, and 4,4.6 emphasize that the reader is "from God", so that it is absolutely clear on which side he or she stands. He or she has received God's gifts and is able on this basis to act correspondingly.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ A.E. BROOKE, *The Johannine Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh 1912) 117 speaks of "love based on faith".

A key verse for the relationship of love and faith is 1 John 3,23, which links love and faith within a double commandment. The following structure of 1 John outlines this commandment: beginning with a relatively short passage about faith (4,1-6), longer passages about love follow (starting with 4,7 and again 4,11)⁽⁵⁰⁾. Whereas the reader's position on faith is clear and he or she is charged to discern and judge others (4,1), in the ethical field he or she now has to become active. It is thus God's commandment not only to believe, but also to love in order to demonstrate that one is really ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ (4,2.4.6.7)⁽⁵¹⁾. Thus 3,23 both structures the following sections of 1 John and sums up the relationship of love and faith.

This thesis about the relationship of love and faith is reinforced by an intertextual reading. In general, the themes of love and faith are distinctly handled by the two basic texts of the Johannine system: whereas John makes the reader encounter Jesus and introduces him or her to christological issues, 1 John consists mainly of ethical parenthesis. Thus, the two texts and the two themes with them form the two poles of the intertextual reading circle already mentioned. The key verse for this relationship is John 13,35 — which is not developed further in John (though the reader finds some basic ideas in John 15 about Christ's exemplary love and the *imitatio Christi* is recommended in 15,10.12). In the narration, it is located at a point where Jesus is in community with his disciples and it is clear that the reader will remain (long after the schism of 6,60-71). It constitutes an external prolepsis⁽⁵²⁾. To fulfil the distinctive marks of a follower of

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Especially 1 John 4,15; 5,1.5.20 return to the christological issue, but this is seen as a new recurrence of the basis at a moment of eschatological distress. The other christological (or more precisely soteriological) confessions concern atonement and sin and thus constitute a part of the ethical parenthesis itself (1,7.9; 2,1.2; 3,5.16; 4,9.14). This is also the case for 5,6-8, which stresses Christ's atonement and his ethical exemplariness. For this interpretation of 5,6-8, see SCHMID, *Gegner*, 202-204.

⁽⁵¹⁾ Although it is my intention here to separate the two fields of love and faith, it must be conceded that the two are not only firmly linked, but also mixed in 3,16; 4,11 (Christ/God as ethical models) and 4,16 (belief in love). The new accent of a non-polemical reading is to interpret 1 John as a general ethical exhortation, not as a "situation" ethics of a sect-like community in crisis, in which latter case ethics would be a community-strengthening response to the opponents (see e.g. BROWN, *Epistles*, 92 speaking about "close love within a community over against those outside").

⁽⁵²⁾ R.A. CULPEPPER, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia 1983) 63 and F.J. MOLONEY, "The Function of John 13-17

Christ, the reader himself or herself has to become active and 1John guides him or her to do so. Thus, the two texts refer to each other: the christological allusions often consisting of short confessional phrases in 1 John (e.g. 2,22.23; 3,23; 4,2.3.15; 5,1.5.20) refer to the comprehensive christological discussions in John (especially in John 1–12), whereas the reflections in 1 John develop the ethical allusions made in the farewell discourse of the Gospel.

The strategy of the ethical exhortation in 1 John is the following: the text of 1 John can be regarded as a linear reading-process with blanks⁽⁵³⁾ leading the reader through the main ethical theme of 1 John. It is dominated by general reflection on ethics, but becomes concrete in 3,17. In the reading-process, the reader proceeds from an introduction of the love commandment (2,3-11) to its christological (3,16) and theological basis (4,11), then through a complex and partly contradictory structure with regard to sin (1,8 compared with 3,6.9; 5,18), which produces a conflict in the reader. The climax is represented by the “sin unto death” (5,16.17), which must not be seen as referring to the opponents but as a blank⁽⁵⁴⁾. It follows the pragmatic strategy of marking a limit of God’s forgiveness, initiating the reader’s critical self-reflection about her or his own standpoint and making the reader ask if he or she might commit or have committed such a sin. The role played by the opponents with regard to this self-reflection has to be examined next. As they are not mentioned in the passages about love and sin, the link cannot be a direct one. But, as we find both types of texts in the same one 1 John, there must be a kind of indirect link to be formed by the reader.

3. *The Opponents as a Counter-Concept*

It may be concluded that the main function of the opponents interacting with the reader is to operate as a counter-concept to the community⁽⁵⁵⁾. The opponents are what the reader should never become,

within the Johannine Narrative”, *What is John?* (ed. F.F. SEGOVIA) (SBL Symposium Series, 7; Atlanta 1998) II, 43-65 (64).

⁽⁵³⁾ W. ISER, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London 1978).

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Contrary to BROWN, *Epistles*, 617-618. For it is neither stated in the text who might commit such a sin, nor what action would constitute a “sin unto death”. As the text is not very concrete here, I speak of a blank and describe its pragmatic function.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ Here and elsewhere in my concept, community is understood as the community of readers.

but what he or she will become if he or she does not follow the basic commandments and lines of the Johannine system. As a personification of denial and border-crossing they illustrate the way of departure, which is the opposite way to mission and joining the community so that the borders of the Johannine system are neither absolute, yet always endangered.

This function of the opponents is linked with the theme of love and faith in a characteristic manner. Whereas both love and faith are required by the community (3,23), border-crossing is illustrated in 1 John in different ways: in the ethical field, it is the community itself that is blamed⁽⁵⁶⁾, in the christological field, the offence is attributed to external opponents⁽⁵⁷⁾. In christology, the reader has certainty so that the christological confessions can be proclaimed briefly and need not be discussed⁽⁵⁸⁾. In the ethical field he or she has to become active while being constantly endangered. The christological transgression of the opponents is a paradigmatic transgression and a warning to the reader, illustrating at the same time the detrimental consequences of border-crossing. A hint of this is the fact that the vocabulary used in 2,18-27; 4,1-6 can be partly found again in 1,6.8.10: *πλανάω* (1,8 – 2,26), *ψεύδομαι* (1,6 – *ψεύδος* 2,21.27 and *ψευδοπροφήται* in 4,1) and *ψεύστης* (1,10 – 2,22). This makes the ethical border-crossing of the ‘we’ comparable to the opponent’s christological border-crossing. As a result, the reader composes his or her own text by directly confronting the two border-crossings.

On the pragmatic level, the opponents invite the reader to check his or her relationship to the Johannine system. Looking at 2,19, where the opponents are connected as close to the community as possible, makes the reader reflect, if not he himself or she herself might be or become one of the antichrists⁽⁵⁹⁾. The theme of 2,19 is that of belonging or not belonging to the community. In a self-referential perspective, the reader, not the opponents, is at the core of this verse. Knowing about the double commandment of faith and love, the reader’s conclusion can

⁽⁵⁶⁾ This is a kind of first-person delimitation (1 John 1,6.8.10). In 2,4.6.9; 4,20 the delimitation is expressed in a neutral third person in the sense of “anybody” and not referring (exclusively) to the opponents.

⁽⁵⁷⁾ Therefore, I only consider 2,18-27; 4,1-6 and nothing more as opponent texts.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ This is evident in 3,23; 4,15; 5,1.5.20, but also in the passages 2,18-27; 4,1-6, which contain no real discussions about the identity of Christ like John, but merely dialectical phrases. See also n. 51.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ This pragmatic interpretation shows that this verse, usually taken as evidence for a historical event behind the text, can also be read differently.

follow that a transgression in ethics is equivalent to a transgression in christology, which has been illustrated with the help of the opponents. For the reader, the motif of the opponents is thus a “reminder of the perennial possibility of failure”⁽⁶⁰⁾.

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Is a non-polemical reading of 1 John convincing and what are its implications? The position with regard to the four points mentioned as characteristic for the polemical approach at the beginning is different. 1 John is not a polemical text in its whole, but only in minor parts. A non-polemical reading demonstrates how the opponents’ motif is related to the main ethical theme of 1 John. This motif, which may be understood as polemical in a rhetorical sense, is thereby interpreted non-polemically as a special type of self-description. Furthermore, I see the following advantages of the non-polemical model:

1 John is often regarded as secondary to John. A non-polemical reading is also a kind of rehabilitation of 1 John, which is no longer described as a “situative” intervention into a past conflict, but as a general text of equal weight to John. The intertextual perspective is also a new model for the relationship of John and 1 John, taking into account both their similarities and their different genre. In addition to this, it bursts open the limits of a historicist model (the presuppositions of which have seldom been explained in the exegesis of 1 John). Questions that cannot be answered recede and more emphasis is put on the text itself and a close-reading of it. Hence, contradictions within the text, which were traditionally explained by means of the opponents, can now be described as steps within a complex reading-process. The question of the semantic of the christological confessions remains relevant, but is embedded into a pragmatic perspective on the function of denial and confession and thus is no more the key issue in reading 1 John.

Moreover, a non-polemical reading of 1 John is more open for relevance to the present so that today’s reader can participate in the reading and 1 John is no longer simply a story about a community more than 1900 years ago, but a story about oneself⁽⁶¹⁾. A further gain is that

⁽⁶⁰⁾ F.J. MOLONEY, *Signs and Shadows*. Reading John 5–12 (Minneapolis 1996) 204.

⁽⁶¹⁾ R.A. CULPEPPER, *The Gospel and the Letters of John* (Interpreting Biblical Texts; Nashville 1998) 287 asks: “Can the Gospel of John continue to function for Christians as a document of faith in the increasing pluralism of American

the text model proposed in this article contributes to the exegetical discussion of intertextuality, systems theory and constructivism.

Finally, I want to return to the aspect of polemics as a category, to which the non-polemical reading (as a method) can also make an important contribution. We find polemics in many places, not only in 1 John. In the usual polemical reading the polemic would be emphasized and thereby legitimated as a response of orthodoxy to the heretics. A non-polemical-reading, however, constitutes a self-critical reading of polemics that tries to find the reasons for the polemics in the community itself and thereby helps to overcome polarization⁽⁶²⁾. The question of the adequacy of polemics, however, is another issue⁽⁶³⁾.

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SUMMARY

When reading 1 John most contemporary interpreters stress its polemical character and use the opponents as a key for the whole text. In contrast to them, this article proposes a non-polemical reading which treats the opponents only as a minor feature of 1 John and denies the possibility of mirror-reading the epistle. The article shows the merits, but also the inconsistencies of already existing non-polemical readings of 1 John. It describes the relationship between 1 John and John as an intertextual reading-process and views the opponents as literary contrasting figures. They form a part of an apocalyptic scenario and are related to the main ethical theme of 1 John. The pragmatic function of the excursus-like opponent texts (1 John 2,18-27; 4,1-6) is to strengthen and reassure the reader by demonstrating that he or she is immune to the opponent's denial of the christological confession. On this basis, the ethical parenthesis takes place, the urgency of which is stressed by the apocalyptic motifs. As a result, the reader tries to avoid an ethical transgression by which he or she would become like the christological opponents, who thus function as a counter-concept to the community.

culture?" It is interesting to observe that, though treating all of Johannine literature in his book, he only asks this question for John. This is symptomatic for a merely historic reading of 1 John.

⁽⁶²⁾ Self-reference, therefore, does not mean a steady blame of the subject — there may be adequate reasons for polemics and calling somebody an opponent, but it does indeed involve a change of perspectives.

⁽⁶³⁾ See the author's reflections on this issue: H. SCHMID, "Gegner werden gemacht. Neutestamentliche, religionsgeschichtliche und aktuelle Perspektiven", *ZKT* 124 (2002) 385-396.