Re-examining Concepts of Religion and Epistemology: Towards a European Culture-Sensitive Theology

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Traditional European theology is shaped by the idea of unity because Christianity has been a decisive factor in uniting Europe since the Constantinian Shift. From modern times on, however, the plurality in Europe has increased. The article argues that modern Europe is characterized by a plurality of religious and non-religious worldviews and therefore needs a new kind of culture-sensitive epistemology to do justice to the prevailing diversity and fluidity of identities. By developing this epistemology, European theology will be able to overcome Eurocentric thinking and thus learn from non-European theologies

In terms of cultural history, the principle of unity was predominant in premodern Europe. This applies to various spheres and areas of life – especially where religion is concerned: Christianity, in this context, was to epitomize the unity of the European continent. The Church, therefore, regarded itself as a unified and at the same time unifying entity – an entity that was united under the bishops and – largely – the Pope. This does not imply that the life circumstances were the same in different areas, but that the concept of unity was structurally decisive. Therefore, in this situation, it was also incumbent on theology to create consistent systems and establish a clear conception of Christianity and, thus, of religion as a whole.

In the modern era, this concept of uniformity became fragile. The increasing differentiation and pluralization of societies were accompanied by the individualization of beliefs. Henceforth, the individual cannot only choose between religious belief systems but also between a variety of non-religious and/or multiple interpretations of meaning. Even the interpretations of meaning

themselves have lost their unambiguity. They have become fluid, as have people's beliefs. In this situation, theology had to develop new concepts for at least two centuries – which, in many respects, were successfully implemented. Religion is now regarded as a personal relational event, and the individual religious experience is receiving more attention. This article argues that it remains indispensable to further elaborate upon the understanding of religion and thus also upon the subject of theology. This is not only due to the processes of increasing modernization that can be observed in European societies but also to the global networking and the growing awareness of the Eurocentric narrowing of traditional concepts. This article is therefore to be understood as a plea for a culture-sensitive theology that not only adapts to the modern social situation but that also achieves to draw lessons from the blindness of traditional European theology in dealing with non-European traditions, identities, and developments.

At the outset of this article, I will present rather rough thoughts on what I understand by "traditional theology." Even if this simplified representation does not necessarily do justice to individual premodern theological approaches, it should suffice for the purpose of this article to highlight which kind of theological concepts need reform. In a second step, I will outline upheavals that characterize European modernity and need to be considered for the development of a theology that does justice to the modern societal situation. In the third part of this article, I will analyze this situation from a philosophical meta-perspective: The focus will be placed on the perception of plurality and on mutual influence as well as local differentiation of convictions and worldviews. The central outcome for European theology will be that it is in need of a concept of faith that overcomes the traditional orientation towards unity: Faith has become fluid and diverse according to a complex network of local and global dependencies that I call 'culture'. Thus, I will conclude this article by highlighting the need for a culture-sensitive theology that does justice to the modern European situation.

'RELIGION' ACCORDING TO THE
TRADITIONAL EUROPEAN UNDERSTANDING

On the one hand, Christianity is based on the Jewish faith: Jesus and his first followers were devout Jews who, as a matter of course, referred to Jewish concepts, Jewish Sacred Scriptures, the Jewish commandments, and Jewish religious practice. Therefore, Christianity could be perceived as a Jewish sect in the first few decades.[1] On the other hand, Judaism was subjected to Hellenistic cultural pressure at that time, from which it sought to dissociate itself to some extent, but which also had stimulating effects, and which made certain adjustment processes inevitable. One of the early landmark decisions of early Christianity, readily attributed to Paul, was to integrate more fully in the Hellenistic cultural sphere.[2] Paul's Areopagus sermon, presented in Acts 17, reflects the underlying idea that Hellenistic culture was characterized by a longing for a personal God and that Hellenistic philosophy had already implicitly argued for belief in this. Thus, theology becomes a more sublime form of philosophy.[3]

Even if the exact historical processes can hardly be traced anymore (and the Areopagus sermon may be a retrospective construct), the result cannot be denied: Christianity turned out to be so convincing in the Roman Empire that it was embraced as the state religion. Thus, the Roman Empire, which was marked by religious plurality at the time of Jesus, decided to set a comprehensive worldview as constitutive for the Empire, based on belief in the transcendent God. This way, a model was created that became determinative for Europe over many centuries up to modern times.

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[1] This is the case in Sueton, *De vita Caesarum* 5,25,4a.

[2] Richard Campbell, *Truth and Historicity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 75–85; Armin Kreiner, *Ende der Wahrheit? Zum Wahrheitsverständnis in Philosophie und Theologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1992), 315–325.

[3] Theo Kobusch, *Christliche Philosophie: Die Entdeckung der Subjektivität* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2006), 152.

The missionary success was only made possible because of the successful "synthesis"[4] between the Jewish and the Hellenistic cultural spheres. This synthesis remains incomprehensible if one interprets it as mere assimilation of the Jewish roots into the Hellenistic culture. The Jewish-Christian faith had to retain a central point to ensure its missionary success.[5] Presumably, the solidary attitude of the Christian communities, the idea of the fundamental equality of the people, and the message of freedom held out by the Gospel were appealing. One decisive factor might have been the promise of a life after death, which implied the belief in a transcendent God and in the resurrection of the individual.

The synthesis must also take the peculiarity of Hellenistic thinking and worldview into account. The young Christian faith was able to gain ground by adapting to the thought patterns of the Hellenistic era. Hints to the nature of these thought patterns, in turn, can be derived from the Areopagus sermon. Here, reference is made to the rational argumentation structure of the Hellenistic philosophy. There might be other aspects, such as the rather static worldview, which departed from the assumption of a meaningfully arranged cosmos that was not subject to any long-term changes. The Jewish conception of long-term salvation history was now on the one hand abbreviated and on the other hand shifted to the hereafter; any genuine change was no longer expected to come about in this world but on Judgement Day. For this reason, also the (recurring) Jewish Messiah figure was largely absolved of its function in this world's life and became the harbinger of the transcendent transformation of the world.

On the one hand, Christianity was dogmatized in this process. In order to first assert itself against competition and later to be able to assume the unifying function assigned to it in the Roman Empire, it had to define itself with clear dogmatic statements. On the other hand, the rational debate was attributed

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[4] Winfried Schröder, *Athen und Jerusalem: Die philosophische Kritik am Christentum in Antike und Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2011), 1.

[5] Patrick Becker, *Jenseits von Fundamentalismus und Beliebigkeit: Zu einem christlichen Wahrheitsverständnis in der (post-)modernen Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Herder, 2017), 106–107.

to a central role in order to properly defend Christianity against criticism in the early days and raising it to the level of the philosophical discourse. Just as Hellenistic philosophy largely adhered to the idea of the unity of reason and of its access to the one ultimate truth, Christianity saw human reason as a sure path leading to God. Hence, a rather hostile attitude prevailed towards other religions, the inferiority of which was seen as the certain result of the proper use of human reason. When Thomas Aquinas admitted reasonableness to the Muslims in the High Middle Ages,[6] this was not a matter of course, but the expression of a new paradigm that made the mission possible. However, Thomas Aquinas also considered the superiority of Christianity to be an indisputable fact. This attitude, in turn, prevented the positive appreciation of plurality and competition. Religious convictions were not considered as fluid, but as unambiguous, rationally justifiable decisions.

This goes hand in hand with a substantialist conception that adheres to the conviction that religion can clearly be defined based on its beliefs. Until the 19th century, when the growing public perception and appreciation of other religions made this assumption increasingly questionable, Christian theology was utterly convinced of its ability to truly grasp and rationally defend its faith. Hegel can be regarded as the culmination and perhaps at the same time the endpoint of this development. His work united the developmental thinking that was gaining ground in modern Europe with the substantialist concept of religion by regarding world history as self-realization of the (world) spirit.[7] Hegel describes different stages of a single world-historical process, for which he draws primarily on European cultural history. He thus subsumes any plurality in the description of the world under a uniform development, the goal of which is the idea of freedom. According to Hegel, this freedom arises from the increasing self-awareness of the divine reason. Not only the concept of unity, but also the primacy of reason is steeped in the good tradition of the

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[6] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* I 2.

[7] See Magnus Schlette, *Die Idee der Selbstverwirklichung: Zur Grammatik des modernen Individualismus* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2013), 12–13.

occidental synthesis that combined Hellenistic philosophy and Christian faith. Hegel can thus be seen as the creator of nothing less than the "great epic of European modernity."[8]

Hans Joas confronts this interpretation of world history with four central objections, which are also pivotal for my reflections.[9] Hegel provides a clear assessment that disregards subjective religious beliefs and that declares conceptualized absolute knowledge to be the objective. He therefore aggressively opposed Friedrich Schleiermacher and his concept of religion, which took the personal human experience as its point of departure. With this intellectualist understanding of faith, Hegel follows the long tradition of antique-medieval philosophy that gives general reason primacy over individual experience. In doing so, however, he devalues corporeality, feelings, and any form of subjectivity. Such an approach is in term to be avoided by modern theology. This is precisely what I will argue for in the following steps. Secondly, Hans Joas criticizes Hegel's linear, highly optimistic understanding of history for attributing a constant increase in freedom to the European development, the zenith of which – according to Hegel – is reached in the Protestant-influenced Prussian state of his time. It is not only the fascisms of the 20th century that refute any such linear interpretation of history; the course of history is more complex and must not be interpreted in a linear way. Thirdly, Hegel's concept of freedom itself must be critically questioned, as it is conceived to be objective in nature and thus arguably fails to sufficiently take the subject into account. Accordingly, Joas fourthly questions Hegel's obviously one-sided Eurocentric conception. Whoever pays tribute to the cultural heterogeneity and does not have a linear understanding of history, will hardly join Hegel in speaking of a development that brings humanity closer to God, but will rather assume a constant level of closeness to God of every culture and time.

With this question, we enter genuinely theological terrain, which is reserved for the last step of this article. Before that, the

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[8] Albrecht Koschorke, *Hegel und wir* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 24.
[9] See Hans Joas, *Im Bannkreis der Freiheit: Religionstheorie nach Hegel und Nietzsche* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020), 35–44.

processes in Europe of the last two centuries will be outlined that undermine this substantialist conception of religion and thus demand the development of new concepts.

UPHEAVALS IN (POST-) MODERN EUROPE

Increasing plurality

Both sociologically and philosophically, transformation processes can be identified in Europe that legitimize and necessitate a different understanding of 'religion'. They can be boiled down to an increase in plurality.[10] A pivotal event was the Reformation era: It stands for the fact that Christianity became diverse *in itself*. This implies that a central element, which until then had epitomized the unity of the people, society, and the entire European continent, became increasingly fragile.

In this situation, European unity was not challenged from the outside, not by immigration, missionary activities, or conquest, but from within. Christianity itself has given up its uniformity. Admittedly, there had already been certain differences before, apparently between an Eastern and a Western church. But up to the high Middle Ages, there were always strivings for unity. In the modern age, however, there was a growing awareness that Christianity consists of different denominations, which consciously demarcate themselves from each other. Nevertheless, the concept of unity was initially still adhered to the Religious Peace of Augsburg that each ruler had to determine the denomination for his territorial dominion. Although the continent was no longer united under a single Christian banner, at least the unity of the individual principalities and kingdoms was upheld.

In the following centuries, the trend towards an increasing pluralization continued. On the one hand, separation processes gained increasing momentum, which led to a drastic increase in the diversity of Christian denominations. On the other hand, religions of the Far East entered the European consciousness. Now and then,

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[10] See Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 6th ed. 2002), 54.

Hinduism and Buddhism had an attraction in the fact that they think in long lines of development and see the interconnectedness of the entire universe. Thinking in large periods of time correlates with the theory of evolution, which sets a stark contrast to the previously rather static perceptions.[11] So while the 'old' way of thinking seemed difficult to reconcile with the new scientific findings, the Far Eastern religions could claim greater compatibility for themselves. Since then, Christian faith has been suspected of being 'old-fashioned' and incompatible with the scientific discoveries, even though the compatibility of the theory of evolution and the Christian faith has long been common knowledge in theology and in the vast majority of Christian denominations.

The fact that Christianity had allied itself with the Hellenistic striving for unity and could therefore now be regarded as the religion of the 'one,' while social perception was increasingly shaped by an emphasis on plurality, probably had an even stronger effect. Therefore, in the 19th century, painful processes were pending in many European countries in which the Christian churches had to learn to lose their grip on society and the new modern states. The increasing secularization went hand in hand with a loss of power, which in turn represents a form of pluralization: Sociologically, modern societies can be described by their functional differentiation. In reverse, this implies that there are no longer institutions with comprehensive power over the people. 'Economy,' 'politics,' 'sports,' 'family,' and 'religion,' for instance, are hence separate spheres.

In the 20th century, Muslims came to Europe in large numbers, bringing their own religion and culture with them. The situation is different in each European country. While England and France registered an influx from former colonies, in particular, Turkish immigrants settled down in Germany and found work here. In recent years, a larger number of refugees, especially from Syria and North Africa, came to individual European countries.

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[11] Hegel's approach, thus, follows the modern paradigm since he thinks of long lines of development. At the same time, his way of thinking remains premodern when he fails to deal with plurality in an appreciative way.

This aroused fear of the foreign, which led to movements of demarcation, especially towards Muslim immigrants, against whom the idea of a uniformly Christian Europe was now maintained. Also in ethical debates, reference is occasionally made to a common set of basic Christian values, just as in some European countries the names of major political parties contain references to a Christian affiliation. Christianity still has a certain formative power for Europe, although sometimes in a national form and without the Christian faith having any great persuasive power.[12]

Secularization and the decline in religiosity

The overall religious situation in Europe must be described as heterogeneous,[13] especially regarding the importance that is still attributed to Christianity. The extent to which the predominant Christian denomination was and is linked to national consciousness turns out to be decisive for the significance of religion.[14] Thus, Christianity continues to play a certain role in countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Italy, where Catholicism was crucial in the formation of national identity. At the same time, a clear overall trend can be observed in all European countries: "In almost all countries (...), a cross-generational decline in the centrality and importance of religion for everyday life can be

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[12] See Thomas Großbölting, *Der verlorene Himmel: Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945* (Göttingen: V&R, 2013).

[13] See Gert Pickel, *Religionsmonitor: Religiosität im internationalen Vergleich* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2013), 11, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/GP_Religionsmonitor_verstehen_was_verbindet_Religioesitaet_im_internationalen_Vergleich.pdf.; Regina Polak, *Megatrend Religion: Neue Religiositäten in Europa* (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 2002); Patrick Becker, Religion in der Krise? Religiöse Pluralität in einer innerweltlich orientierten Gesellschaft, in *Die gegenwärtige Krise Europas: Theologische Antwortversuche*, eds. Martin Kirschner and Karlheinz Ruhstorfer (Freiburg: Herder, 2018), 103–120.

[14] See John Carter Wood, ed., *Christianity and National Identity in Twentieth Century Europe: Conflict, Community, and the Social Order* (Göttingen: V&R, 2016); Miklós Tomka and Réka Szilárdi, "Religion and Nation," in *Focus on Religion in Central and Eastern Europe. A Regional View*, eds. András Máté-Tóth and Gergely Rosta (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 75–110.

observed,"[15] Gert Pickel points out based on the Religious Monitor, a large-scale long-term study conducted in 21 countries scattered around the globe. Other studies confirm this: for Western Europe, Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta even attest to a "comprehensive decline in importance"[16] of religion on the individual level. The detrimental effect on the institutions is even greater – the two authors write about "dramatic secularization processes"[17] that even expanded to once highly religious countries such as Ireland and Spain.

These studies reinforce the *theory of secularization*, which describes the decline of the influence institutionalized religion as well as religion in general have on modern European societies.[18] On the basis of an overview of various sociological surveys, Gert Pickel traces a loss of importance of religion in Germany "from one generation to the respective succeeding generation."[19] He, therefore, sees a "continuous break with the tradition of Christianity"[20] that manifests itself in an "increasing distancing of the people from the institutional church."[21] This is a result of the decreasing institutional ties, which influence the personal belief and become more and more elusive and uncertain: "On the whole, it can be stated that for more and more people, religion increasingly becomes a subordinate part of their everyday life,"[22] he concludes. His assumption that "secular options represent the greatest competition of the religious (...)"[23] is supported by the Religion

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[15] Pickel, *Religionsmonitor*, 10.

[16] Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta, *Religion in der Moderne: Ein internationaler Vergleich* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015), 223.

[17] Ibid.

[18] See Detlef Pollack, *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

[19] Gert Pickel, "Religion, Religionslosigkeit und Atheismus in der deutschen Gesellschaft – eine Darstellung auf der Basis sozial-empirischer Untersuchungen," in *Religion, Konfessionslosigkeit und Atheismus*, eds. Katja Thörner and Martin Thurner (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 179–223, 200.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 202.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

Monitor, which correlates these results with the high approval of the scientific view.

The assessment provided by Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta follows this direction as well. For Eastern Europe, they come to a nuanced view, which on one hand takes radically secularized states such as the Czech Republic and Estonia into account, but at the same time considers predominantly religious countries such as Poland or countries with an increase in the importance of religion such as Bulgaria, Romania, or Russia (the latter however at a very low rate in absolute terms). In the case of Russia, a closer look is worthwhile. With the exceptionally high increase in the importance attributed to religion there is less "a religious revival, but more an expression of political and national expectations projected onto Orthodoxy."[24] Thus, while these three countries would not know a decline in the political importance of their national Orthodox churches, they would very well witness a decline in the importance of faith for the individual. Pollack and Rosta thus portray the high level of religious practice in certain Eastern European countries as being less driven by the faith of the individual but rather by political events. In consequence, they support the hypothesis that the importance of religious beliefs in modern Europe is borne less by the inner vitality of the religious community and more by national identity aspirations.

Since Western Europe is almost unfamiliar with such political processes that strengthen religious institutions, a clearer situation prevails. Here Pollack and Rosta note a transformation process that involves a "deconcretization"[25] of religious convictions. The (biblical) belief in a personal and historically powerful God is increasingly replaced by "an impersonal being or a higher power whose workings cannot be experienced directly"[26]. Esoteric and holistic religious concepts are exempted from the decline in significance. According to Pollack and Rosta, they are based on an "enlightenment- and progress-skeptical zeitgeist (...), which is not primarily religious in nature, but generally qualified as critical of

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[24] Pollack and Rosta, "Religion in der Moderne," 313.
[25] Ibid., 224.
[26] Ibid., 223.

institutions, technology, and rationality, and which above all follows the laws of the market and fashion."[27]

Individualization and mundane orientation

While traditional Christian convictions are in decline in Europe, the human quest for meaning did not disappear. Sociologists still describe a longing for transcendence for which, however, answers are now being found individually on a mundane level. To understand this shift in modern Europe, the sociologist Thomas Luckmann defines 'transcendence' by referring experience of the individual. He then distinguishes between 'great' transcendence, which refers to an extraordinary experience, 'medium' transcendence, which is based on experiences in dealing with other people, and 'minor' transcendence, in which "the individual comes up against spatial and temporal limits of his/her being in the here and now"[28].

According to this logic, there is already a 'minor' transcendence and thus religiosity in today's body cult– from tattooing to asceticism and wellness culture. One can even see it as paradigmatic for the process of religious individualization in Europe, since in it "the individual him-/herself has become the central object of religious meaning formation."[29] "The cult of the body," Robert Gugutzer explains, "represents an individualized social form of the religious that endows life with meaning and that allows for the creation of identity."[30] The transformation of modern European society, therefore, does not experience a decrease in religiosity, but a shift from large-scale to minor transcendence. As a result, the human quest for meaning no longer necessitates a longing for God.

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[27] Ibid., 225.

[28] Robert Gugutzer, "Die Sakralisierung des Profanen: Der Körperkult als in-dividualisierte Sozialform des Religiösen," in *Körper, Sport und Religion: Zur Soziologie religiöser Verkörperungen*, eds. Robert Gugutzer and Moritz Böttcher (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012), 285–308, 291.

[29] Ibid., 288.

[30] Ibid., 286.

Hubert Knoblauch, therefore, extends the concept of religiosity and integrates not only the cult of the body but also football, Zen meditation, and horoscopes. In this way, he marks a transformation of religion, which– according to the theories of secularization and individualization – takes personal experiences as its basis. He, therefore, sees religion as having been replaced by spirituality, which implies the loss of significance of institutions while the subjective experience of transcendence is simultaneously prized highly.[31]

According to Charles Taylor, the individualization of faith lead to a fragile and consequently fluid identity formation. The meaning of life is no longer answered by referring to closed systems provided by one religious institution but as part of a complex, individual search.[32] Nowadays, affiliations are less unambiguous and less shaped by external manifestations than in premodern Europe. They became fluid.

A look beyond Europe arises the question of whether this fluid understanding of religion and religiosity did not already prevail in other cultures before or even since the very beginning. This, in turn, would imply that premodern Europe inherits a special role. If this question is to be answered positively, it would imply that the premodern European concept of religion has never done justice to the global situation and that its redefinition is, therefore, indispensable not only based on modern theoretical considerations but also in order to finally overcome Eurocentrism.

Such a look also points to the fact that not only national ties but also vibrant religious market situations, in which different religions enter a fruitful and open competition, are conductive to the importance that is attributed to the religions in a country. This hypothesis arises at least for the USA if one tries to understand the noticeably more vibrant situation of the religious communities

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[31] Knoblauch, Populäre Religion, 41.

[32] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 505–535.

there. Conversely, it could provide one possible explanation for the low importance attributed to religiosity in Europe.[33]

European churches and religions can learn from this observation: If they oppose an integration into state politics and positively accept the basic principle of (post-)modernity, namely the increase in plurality, religiosity could gain in value again. The focus point of religious communities would thus shift from a state-supporting functionalization to a catering to the needs of the individual (potential) members. While positively accepting and working with the principle of individualization, the decline of religiosity could be stopped.

THE NEED FOR A CULTURE-SENSITIVE THEOLOGY

The analysis of the transformation processes in modern Europe leads to the conclusion that the traditional conception of 'religion' as outlined at the outset of this article does not do justice to the current situation. Instead of an approach oriented towards uniformity and unambiguity, the plurality and inner fluidity inherent to all worldviews must now be taken into account. Since the churches have forfeited their previously all-encompassing social influence (theory of secularization), the individual and his/her personal needs and decisions must increasingly be considered (theory of individualization). These are integrated into social processes and consecutively into long-term lines of development in cultural history, which cannot be interpreted linearly. 'Religion' can therefore not be grasped primarily in external definitions but must be understood with sensitivity for concrete historical developments as well as cultural and individual conditions.

This does not entail a disintegration of 'religion' into individual independent systems of conviction. On the contrary, it is the interaction between the big picture (world-church pronouncements, Holy Scriptures, etc.) and the local-individual situations that give rise to certain expressions of the religious. With the necessary awareness for cultural developments, the tradition

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[33] Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 9–21.

acquires a high value, although not only in the central interpretation but contingent on local characteristics. Nor have institutions lost their significance – they continue to be essential when it comes to handing down the tradition. Their role is to create the conditions for a religious horizon within which experiences can be made and evaluated. Therefore, as a matter of course, it still makes sense under modern conditions to speak of *the* Christianity or *the* Buddhism. However, in order to understand the concrete world of faith, it is no longer sufficient to look at it from the outside: To that effect, the concrete, historically grown situation that is shaped by various local and global developments, has to be taken into account.

For the argumentation of this article, it is decisive to keep in mind that it is the inner development of Europe itself that imposes this change in the concept of religion. At the same time, the redefinition of the concept of religion implies an overcoming of a Eurocentric narrowness that brings about fundamental changes in European theology: it now not only manages to deal appreciatively with non-European concepts in their uniqueness, but it even derives impulses for its own further development from these concepts. To this effect, it must acquire a cultural sensitivity that is based on a different theological epistemology. For the development of such an epistemology, this article will first follow up on the philosophical debates of the 20th and 21st centuries that are centering on the question of the extent to which humanity has access to any ultimate truth.

Philosophical foundations

In modern Western philosophy, various trends can be identified regarding the question of truth, which can be distinguished in their essence precisely in the juxtaposition provided by this article. Analytic philosophy (and theology), for instance, is based on a powerful version of metaphysical thinking that values an unambiguous, logic-based explanation of reality. This can be seen against the backdrop of an approach that I classified as 'traditional' at the outset of this article, and be contrasted with postmodern philosophical approaches, which assume a more

pluralistic, culture-sensitive take on the world. Here, a positioning can be identified that is under the impression of a globally increasing pluralization, individualization, and fragmentation of societies.

Such juxtapositions should certainly be treated with caution. However, they have been made in philosophical discourse for several decades and have therefore already been discussed extensively here. A powerful example is in Richard Rorty's book "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature."[34] Rorty's basic concern consists primarily in a normative demarcation from traditional concepts that regard truth as something that is attainable for the human being in this world. Truth is no longer understood by Rorty as an asset that can be reliably captioned by human reason, but rather as an unattainable ideal that the human being can only approach within this world without ever being able to issue a final judgment. Accordingly, truth is something that only exists in the plural because the human cognitive process lacks an Archimedean point that would allow us an ultimate judgment as to the question of which statement is closer to the 'genuine' truth. Rorty has taken an extreme stance in the discourse because he intends to dispense the concept of truth altogether. However, since he aims at the appreciation of plurality and at the avoidance of pretensions to power that is based on the reference to the one ultimate truth, he is precise in keeping with the (post-)modern social situation outlined above.

Simon Blackburn attempts not to set the two concepts of truth in opposition to each other but to provide a neutral analysis from an observer's perspective. He calls the one side absolutism: "When we are absolutists," he explains, "we stand on truth. We like plain, unvarnished objective fact, and we like it open, transparent, and unfiltered."[35] On the other hand, he sees relativism: "Relativists [...] see nothing anywhere that is plain, unvarnished, objective, open transparent or unfiltered. [...] They insist upon the

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[34] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).
[35] Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), XV.

universal presence of happenstance, brute contingencies of nature or culture or language or experience, that shape the way we see things."[36]

Blackburn investigates the motives and reservations against the respective other side in both concepts of truth. "Absolutism gives us security and self-assurance; the relativist sees dangerous unthinking innocence and complacency,"[37] he notes. In this short sentence lies an essential key to understanding the two sides, which fit into the description of (post-)modern society: Whoever positively accepts and embraces the complex plurality of (post-)modern society will, like Richard Rorty, rather tend toward relativistic concepts of truth. Those who long for (knowledge) places holding out a promise of un-ambiguity and certainty in contemporary society will resort to absolutist patterns of argumentation to this end. While the relativistic way of thinking considers plurality to be a privileged situation in which the individual can choose between different options and take a stand on them from a subjective position, the absolutist approach strives for a fixed reference system, an anchoring, and a sense of belonging.

The philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, who significantly coined the discussion about postmodern philosophy in Germany, also refers to the idea of plurality as a counter-draft to the rigorous uniform thinking of metaphysics, which he calls "uniformization."[38] He considers it to be the "key concept of modernism. All the topoi that have become known as postmodern – the end of meta-narratives, the dispersion of the subject, the decentralization of meaning, the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, the unsynthesizability of multiple forms of life and patterns of rationality – becomes understandable in the light of plurality."[39] Welsch emphasizes that this plurality certainly is not to be equated with arbitrariness. Plurality relies on the appreciation of difference. In order to make difference tangible, criteria have to be defined on the basis of which differences can be identified and also

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., XVII.
[38] Welsch, Unsere postmoderne Moderne, 54.
[39] Ibid., XVII.

assessed. The difference in uniformization lies in the fact that any uniform thinking condemns divergent thinking per se and evaluates other approaches according to the extent to which they deviate from their own convictions. Plural ways of thinking also cannot completely avoid an evaluation of other approaches (simply because everyone has to opt for one of the offered approaches themselves). However, they do not have to disparage them from the very outset.

A second important feature of relativist thought is 'anti-essentialism.' This is where distrust of transcendent, ahistorical, and universal concepts of the explanation of the world come into play. This already becomes evident on the level of language and in the use of terminology. From a metaphysical-critical point of view, the attempt to grasp 'the truth' of phenomena through the (Platonic) insight into their 'essence' or 'nature' is already doomed to failure at the conceptual stage. Here, concepts are conceived as ciphers, as placeholders for a whole conglomerate of linguistic-cultural conventions. Our knowledge of phenomena does not arise from a deeper insight into their essence but is confined to the knowledge we acquired about them through our actions and dealings with them, as well as through our linguistic communication about them. In this perspective, various authors gradually dismantle the powerful concepts transmitted by tradition: among others, 'logos,' 'ratio,' 'true cognition,' and 'truth.' The term 'God' is also sometimes included here, though in recent years a much more positive resonance seems to be developing again.[40]

Anti-essentialists are committed to making the extension of concepts visible again and analyzing the 'grammar' of the underlying language. They do not strive to trivialize the experiences stored in the traditional vocabulary or even to transfer them to the realm of arbitrariness. Language always follows a set of rules. It only functions as an efficient tool when it is linked to every day and intersubjectively communicable experiences.

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[40] Examples are the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo and the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas: Gianni Vattimo, *Credere di credere. È possibile essere cristiani nonostante la chiesa?* (Mailand: Garzanti, 1999); Jürgen Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005).

Thus, if relativistic concepts do not imply arbitrariness, they can also be tied to the question of truth. A helpful example of this is provided by the work of Hilary Putnam. The US-American philosopher adheres to the metaphysic-critical as well as an anti-essentialist basic tendency, while nevertheless advocating the concept of objective truth. Internal realism, which Putnam developed in the 1970s,[41] attempts to strike a balance between what Putnam himself calls traditional realism and traditional anti-realism. Putnam attributes four features to traditional realism. These comprise correspondence (truth as an agreement between proposition and fact), independence (truth as something that is independent of the human potential to access it), bivalence (a proposition is either true or false), and uniqueness (there is only one truth).[42] Putnam refers to cultural relativism as traditional anti-realism, according to which truth is established solely as an agreed convention within a group and therefore has in no way any pretension of objectivity. Both positions exert an intuitive appeal on us since on the one hand we often experience that the human being is confronted with different truths, between which she/he cannot make a decision, while on the other hand we basically want to hold on to the fact that ultimately – and under clearly defined premises – only one version meets objective validity requirements.

According to Putnam, this balancing act between subjective representation and objective claim already takes place at the conceptual level. On the one hand, concepts do not have any absolute meaning but are applied differently in different systems. Concepts are therefore relative since they are always linked to a system of assumptions and prerequisites. One the other hand, once we have opted for a system of concepts, clear rules apply. Within this system, we then claim to possess access to an objective truth that is intersubjectively verifiable.

Putnam now wants to unite both sides – the relativity of all our concepts and propositions on the one side and the objectivity

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[41] See Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1975): 131–193.

[42] See Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Massachussetts 1988), chapter 7.

claim of the concept of truth on the other side – by speaking of truth when a proposition is rationally accepted under epistemologically ideal circumstances. The requirement of ideal circumstances seeks to accommodate the objective side: There is an independent truth that the human being can grasp under ideal circumstances. With the element of rational acceptance, Putnam refers to the subjective component: What we accept depends on many external factors but is ultimately our own choice. For Putnam, truth and rationality are closely intertwined. What can be considered rational is determined by our cultural background and in particular by our system of values. Thus, Putnam claims that there is a close relationship between facts and values. However, values and thus also rationality are not arbitrary in nature. There is general agreement on values and rationality, which Putnam qualifies as an objective claim. Again, it becomes evident that relativism and arbitrariness must in no way be related to each other. Even if we basically have to content ourselves with our merely subjective perspective, we always strive to define intersubjective criteria.

Theological yield

The philosophical debate outlined above strikes the very core of theology: If the unattainability of the ultimate truth is asserted, this also raises the question to what extent religions can speak of God or of a supreme being at all. Since the harsh religion-critical theses propagated by Friedrich Nietzsche, there has been the suspicion that (post-)modern thinking critical of metaphysics is per se nihilistic and thus also rejects religious faith. Therefore, at the end of this article, it is now necessary to formulate a theologically compatible epistemology.

It is crucial for a modernity-compatible epistemology to abandon the claim of being able to prove a belief to be true and thus superior by using the power of reason common to all human beings. This claim is based on a cross-cultural and ahistorical way of thinking. It insinuates that all human beings would ultimately have to arrive at the same set of convictions if they only applied the power of their minds correctly. From a (post-)modern point of view,

the power of human reason is seen in absolute terms here and thus overestimated. The reason, however, as I previously pointed out by citing Hilary Putnam, is experience-related and thus culture-dependent. It is therefore reasonable to assume that an 'epistemological circle' develops.[43] Every human being is shaped by his/her worldview, from which personal values and the concept of rationality are derived. With this worldview, the human being approaches the world and thus interprets his/her own experiences. The essence of modern philosophy is to understand experiences as inevitably interpreted. However, experiences can change one's worldview, at least in the long term. There are good reasons for referring to theodicy as the rock of atheism. The experience of suffering in this world serves as a strong argument brought up against the belief in a God that is essentially kind and almighty.

If one takes this development into account, the circle turns into a spiral: Worldviews and different interpretations of the world are both interdependent and contain the ability to progress. With this 'epistemological spiral,' the human beings are initially left to their own devices but are in turn integrated into their respective cultural context. No human being is independent of the cultural context to which she/he belongs. Therefore, the concept of culture becomes important as do institutions that hand down cultural values and ideas: They offer the human being possibilities of interpretation and make them plausible. Religious communities can serve as an example of this: The Catholic Church, for example, is important in that it helps individuals in concrete life by showing them ways of interpreting meaning. This can only succeed if the church gets involved with people's cultural background and their horizon of experience.

Here it is already clear why (post-)modern thinking that is critical of metaphysics does not result in either religion or church hostility. On the contrary, the church can demonstrate its importance in the transmission of tradition and thus its core area

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[43] Patrick Becker, "Die Erfahrung des (ganz) anderen: Zu einem kultursensi-blen Umgang mit (religiösen) Überzeugungen," in *Religiöse Erkenntnis? Gegenwärtige Positionen zur Religiösen Epistemologie*, eds. Martin Breul and Klaus Viertbauer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

of meaning. Even religions that refer to an ultimate truth are not per se a target of criticism: Even Richard Rorty, who does not refer to the concept of truth, does not deny the existence of truth 'as such' and sees the necessity to lay claim to truth. What he opposes is the *recourse* to the *one* truth. He sees the human quest for truth as a practical endeavor and therefore as a process that will never reach completion.[44] Accordingly, it is only to be viewed critically if justification practices are to be ended with reference to the one truth. To put it pointedly: What Rorty rejects are fundamentalistic argumentation patterns that immunize religious statements against criticism and put them beyond reach of the critical discourse.[45]

This concern of Richard Rorty can easily be caught up theologically, namely by a separation of immanence and transcendence. While secular philosophy is forced to discuss idealized conditions that will never be attained in this world, theology can attribute them to God. God can thus become a 'place' of truth, beauty and the good. This integrates the comments on Hilary Putman, insofar as God is the 'place' where the interrelatedness of values and claims to truth in all their complexity collapses and becomes one. What is only conceivable within the world as an interminable process can here be thought of as coinciding beyond space and time. This results in a theologically highly compatible epistemology that anchors absolute truth transcendentally in God and speaks immanently of its unattainability: The intra-worldly dependence of worldviews, rationality, and the level of experience is here embedded in the transcendence of God which, in turn, goes beyond it. Following David Tracy's argumentation, one can speak of this position as embracing a "recovery of the hidden and incomprehensible God."[46] With a (post-)modern epistemology, the divine transcendence can be taken seriously, and thus also humility can be redefined.

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[44] Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* Volume 1, ed. Richard Rorty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 126–150.

[45] Patrick Becker, "Fundamentalismus als aktuelle Herausforderung," in *Stimmen der Zeit* 232 (2014): 473–482.

[46] See Erik Borgman, "Theologie: Wissenschaft an den Grenzen," in *Concilium* 42 (2006): 248–258, 249.

From a Christian point of view, this epistemology can be justified with the Bible: The inaccessibility of God is a biblical topos and is sung about for example in Psalm 139 and reflected by Paul (Rom 11:33). At the same time, the question is raised of how people in this world can grasp the truth of the divine message. Matthew's Gospel contains a warning against „false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Mt 7,15). Their quality is compared to bad or rotten trees or other plants that bear no or evil fruits. The good tree, on the other hand, is recognized by its "good fruit." It is significant to note at this point that the decision for or against a message is not made based on the content– it is by no means relevant here. Nor can any external argument be presented since the prophets refer to the teachings of Jesus. Therefore, only the purely pragmatic (and thus: relativistic) criterion remains, which is attached to morally charged terms: "Thus you will recognize them by their fruits" (Mt 7,20). "The ultimate test of the truth is in deeds, not claims or pretensions,"[47] Donald Hagner concludes.

With Hagner, I can argue that this (post-)modern epistemology takes up the situation of the biblical time. Thus, a relativistic epistemology expresses a basic concern of the Christian message: It leads to an appreciation of transcendence, which is characterized by a level of perfection that is unattainable in the inner world, as well as by immanence, which in its diversity strives for this perfection in different ways, without actually 'possessing' it or even being identical with it. It emphasizes both the value of the individual in his/her uniqueness and his/her dependence on and relation to transcendence. As already outlined above, religious institutions assume a central role here by offering the individual a horizon of interpretation. They stand by the individual by handing down and making available the whole range of the respective religious culture.

This leads to the conclusion: A relativistic epistemology corresponds to original biblical intentions. Thus, it can ground a culture-sensitive Christian theology, which at the same time does

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[47] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13* (Dallas: Zondervan Academic, 1993), 184.

justice to the modern European societal situation and overcomes Eurocentrism. As a result, it can reach out to other cultures and deal with the diverse situation of Christianity in the world. European theology can identify plurality as a value and can learn from different cultural settings and theological approaches in the world. The curious view of Non-European situations and theologies will not only enrich European theology but will also help to adapt to the modern realities in Europe itself.

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