

14 Sustaining Diversity: Religious Pluralism and the Challenge for Theology

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Introduction

Religion, in Western Europe at least, seems to be developing towards an arbitrary individualism. The era of culture-based Christianity seems to be over, but it has not been replaced by a purely secular culture. Rather, we witness a rise of religion and spirituality. Post-Christian privatized religion booms, as sociologist Peter L. Berger demonstrated in his survey, *The Desecularization of the World* (Berger 1999). Religion has not lost its relevance, but the churches and the Christian elements of traditional culture no longer influence the formation of people's beliefs. And although the traditional churches now occasionally profit from this trend, on the whole they have lost their relevance for large sections of our societies. Accordingly, the basic inclinations with regard to religion in Western Europe include the individualization of faith, religious pluralism, implicit religion and the phenomena of 'believing without belonging' and 'belonging without believing'. A high percentage of people without affiliation to a religious institution practise prayer, value spirituality and refer to religious experiences, while a sometimes even higher percentage of people belonging to a religious community do none of these things.

Enlightenment and liberalism

These observations indicate that we might be standing at the end of a development that started with the Enlightenment, but has resulted in a constellation unforeseen by its initiators. The legacy of the Enlightenment regarding the meaning of religion must be seen as twofold. On the one hand it identified religion as a private affair that is not subject to governmental regulation. On the other hand it regarded religion as a matter of individual conviction, and consequently as unable to defend itself *coram publico*, in the arena of the public authority of reason (cf. Dalferth 1996).

Immanuel Kant, for example, strictly distinguished between legal laws and regulations that must be implemented by force and the threat of punishment and moral laws and

virtues that constitute the moral character of human beings and that can only be propagated as a matter of free, self-determined choice. Morality can only be individually and deliberately adopted. While the state has to regulate public life through public laws, it cannot rule the hearts of its citizens and must not interfere with religious or other belief systems. It can only allow and give the opportunity for self-determined religions of ethical communities:

But woe to the legislator who wishes to establish through force a polity directed to ethical ends! For in so doing he would not merely achieve the very opposite of an ethical polity but also undermine his political state and make it insecure. The citizen of the political commonwealth remains therefore, so far as its legislative function is concerned, completely free to enter with his fellow-citizens into an ethical union in addition [to the political] or to remain in this kind of state of nature, as he may wish. (Kant 1960, 87)

The other political development stemmed from Enlightenment-sequestered religion in the private sphere, where (for example) the First Amendment, as read in the light of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, seemed to place it. Jefferson coined the phrase 'wall of separation' for such a division between the public political realm and private individual convictions (cf. Dreisbach 2002). As long as the public order is not disturbed, the private convictions of individuals are of no interest to the government. Or as Jefferson commented: 'it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg' (Jefferson 1904, 221). Justice as the acknowledgement of mutual rights demands that individuals can freely practise their religion no matter what it is, as long as they do not hurt or hinder others, and the state should refrain from any favouritism concerning religious groups, values or motivations.

But in the situation of radicalized pluralism and clashes of different cultural identities one has to realize that this notion of regulative justice is an achievement *within* a specific culture. While it was meant formally to regulate the realm of public reason, it still rests on positive values of a certain idea of humanity, which was tacitly and implicitly presupposed and which is now endangered. Acknowledging modern radicalized pluralism also entails acknowledging the fact that there is a plurality of competing theories of justice with regard to the public relevance of religion and other convictions, and that it is hardly possible to judge these on neutral grounds. This is the starting-point for John Rawls' notion of justice as fairness, which refrains from marking out a specific concept of justice. Rawls does not argue in favour of certain convictions concerning the nature of the person, the nature of human relationships, the goals of human existence, or any concept of ultimate goods and a good life. He raises no truth-claims concerning anthropology, but tries to construe a strictly operational concept of justice that rests on the idea of society as a system of fair cooperation and not on any substantial good. What forces us to develop justice as fairness is nothing but 'the common interest in public order and security' (Rawls 1971, 211). According to Rawls, it is in principle evident to all citizens that there are core prerequisites for any kind of fair cooperation. These conditions for the possibility of fairness include two major principles, which Rawls calls the liberty principle and the difference principle. The liberty principle calls for political and

juridical rights that at the same time maximize individual freedom. The difference principle demands a designing of the differences and regulations of society in such a way as to enable an increase in benefit for everybody, and, in principle, to allow access to all relevant political positions for everybody. Thus, pluralism does not mean a contingent plurality of mostly wrong or at least limited opinions, but it is the positive pluralism of (mostly) reasonable but on the whole incompatible views of a good life. Accordingly, pluralism is what should be expected when taking into account the natural and enriching differences among human beings. Although Rawls has drawn a lot of criticism on his position and has also significantly revised his theory (cf. Rawls 2001), his theory can be considered as the predominant model of political liberalism in the last five decades.

We should by no means disregard the achievements of religious liberty and political liberalism as represented by John Rawls and other authors, such as Jürgen Habermas in Germany. But I would argue that they do not sufficiently meet the challenge of radicalized pluralism. While in Western countries the advantages of liberal pluralism can be considered as commonly accepted, also among the churches, the geopolitical events of the past five years have reminded us of the fact that a large number of people on this planet do not observe the distinction between the private and the public, between belief and knowledge, between revelation and reason. It is not sufficient to regard these people as premodern and in need of our elucidating education: an education that they see as materialistic, cynical and a means of alienation, which it often is. The dichotomy between individual and society as well as the dichotomy between reason and belief are both meaningful tools and notions for our pluralist societies, but they have to be balanced with quests for shared values and common goods. When religious individualism is linked to religious indifference, religious preferences appear as matters of taste and not of truth, thus the public justification of religious beliefs becomes unnecessary and meaningless. But neither can the destructive potential of religion and its tendencies towards superstition, sectarianism and violent fundamentalism be effectively confined, nor can the latent conflicts of how to integrate religious beliefs into communal life be addressed. If the critical quest for truth and obligation is suspended, trends are fostered that tend towards an open or secret totalitarianism of civil religion, and supposedly self-evident economic necessities. The reduction of society to a functional sphere of mutual fairness reduces society to economics, so that the individual is mainly seen as consumer. The meaningfulness of the good is replaced by the attractiveness of goods, including religion. Consequently, religion itself is in danger of adopting the mechanisms of the market and becoming a consumer item.

Challenges for theology

What are the challenges Christian theology has to deal with in this situation? As I see it, the following five points need to be taken into consideration:

1. The Christian faith has at its centre the unconditional love of God, as revealed through and put into effect by Jesus Christ. Therefore the Christian faith confesses the free, unconditional and transcendent origin of its confidence. That we believe and trust in God is nothing we can produce and guarantee by any kind of technique or argument.

It is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, Christianity must follow a *pluralism on principle* (cf. Herms 1995), because it is aware of the fact that the authentic origin of its own belief, as well as of other religious beliefs and existential convictions, is not within the reach of human interference. In matters of conviction any form of force or pressure of open or hidden manipulation must be denied.

At the same time the Christian message is a public one. Christianity is called to deliver 'the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead' (Barmen 1962, 242). Along with pluralism on principle, the Christian faith implies the fundamental non-privacy of its convictions and their public relevance. This also applies to every other religion or worldview, in so far as religion is always a matter of ultimate concern. And while no religion can be practised without consequences for the individual's lifestyle, every religion has a public and a political dimension. This implies the demand that every religious person must be willing to be open to rational critique and to possible correction of her own views.

As an indispensable prerequisite for communicating this insight, Christian theology has to engage in dialogue with scientific investigations of religions, and has also to develop a sound philosophy of religion of its own that deals with fundamental questions of reasonable accounts of religious convictions. Christian theology must embark upon the important task of demonstrating that reasonable accounts of religion and its function are possible and can be well-grounded and appropriate, and that this task can be met without violating the integrity and self-understanding of the Christian faith. Within the framework of intercultural and inter-religious hermeneutics the question that has to be answered is how such an approach can be developed so that it becomes valuable for every participant, i.e. for persons holding different religious beliefs or no religious beliefs at all.

2. Christian pluralism on principle must not be confused with a *pluralism of indifference*. Christianity cannot be satisfied with a religious bricolage that follows fashionable trends and regards religious convictions simply a matter of taste, like a hobby or a private recreational activity. Christian theology insists on the fact that the Christian faith is not an arbitrary attitude, but that through the gospel God has appealed to us and was made accessible, although our understanding and our representations of God always fall short and must be critically reviewed. God's revelation does not simply justify human factual existence, but it also breaks the powers of evil and sin and promises fulfilment of life. Christian theology should be faithful to this objective, critical and obligatory dimension of its central story.

3. Thus Christianity from its beginnings was characterized by its *differentiation between faith and theology*. This critical differentiation is owed to the fact that faith tends to degenerate into superstition if it does not question itself or ask for truth with regard to the living God. Faith needs theological reflection. At the same time theology can only be developed out of faith itself: it does not describe the Christian faith from a neutral position, but develops its content and assertions from a perspective of participation. Christian theology has to balance the insight that there is no neutral position in matters of religion with the conviction that the quest for truth must not be renounced and applies to all forms of religion and existential worldviews. It must be aware of the relativity and contingency of all cultural and religious diversity, including its own, with regard to ultimate truth.

4. Therefore, Christian theology finds itself *entangled with the human quest for meaning and truth* as it appears in science, philosophy and religion. It must in its very core be disposed to listening and understanding. It must have a vital interest in dialogue with philosophy and science, as well as other religions. It exists in solidarity with any human activity seeking better self-understanding. It must present itself as a natural and competent partner of any kind of meaningful search for truth. It has to protest whenever this quest is repressed by ideologies or silenced by social or economical surrogates. At the same time theology has to make clear that faith seeking understanding is an open hermeneutical task. It does not compete against science for the better scientific description of reality. When theology speaks of creation and creatures it does not claim a superior knowledge of reality, but proposes to interpret reality, to see reality in a certain light, the light of God's presence. It proposes a certain attitude towards reality and human existence that is neither arbitrary nor self-evident, but controversial.

5. It is therefore an eminent task for Christian theology today to develop and supply tools for differentiation and critical distinctions that can shape and form public debates on religious matters. Among the set of rules applicable in this situation are the following:

- In our theological theories as well as in our method we have to maintain the difference between our understanding of God and God him-/herself.
- Abstract concepts of God can be helpful and are indeed indispensable when developing and formulating any understanding of God and God's relation to the world. But any exploration of theological questions only makes sense within a perspective of participation and not of neutral observation. Theology cannot but be developed out of basic and specific convictions.
- God's point of view of reality, a theory of everything that includes both the object and the subject of knowledge with all his and her facets of life, is not accessible, neither for science nor for theology. For the dialogue between science and theology this means that the sustenance of the diversity of perspectives, methods and insights is indispensable and has to be developed into a mutually fruitful openness.

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