Claudia D. Bergmann | Johan Temmerman (Ed.)

Religious Diversity and Global Concerns

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This volume is the result of a Erasmus+ partnership between the Faculty for Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (FPTR), Belgium, and the Institute of Protestant Theology at Paderborn University, Germany. The two institutes have been in contact since March 2022.

In 2022, the idea arose that scholars working in Brussels and Paderborn could combine their ideas and their research on questions of religious diversity as both institutes face changes in their studentship. Both countries, Belgium as well as Germany, experience rapid developments in their church bodies and other religious institutions, and all of us observe how our societies change in terms of politics. Since we understand ourselves as theologians with a keen eye on cultural developments, for us, combining societal and religious studies seemed to be an ideal way of analyzing and dealing with these transformations.

A working relationship between the two institutes developed, in which the junior scholars Anna Neumann and Anne Breckner, now both awarded with doctoral degrees, were the leading *personae* on the German side, and Johan Temmerman, dean of the FPTR, initiated the work on the Belgian side. Several visits in Paderborn and in Brussels strengthened the relationships between the institutes. In 2024, before the finishing touches to the book were made, the responsibility of editorship on the German side was handed over to Claudia D. Bergmann, the newly appointed Professor for Biblical Theology and Exegesis at Paderborn University. On the Belgian side, it remained in the hands of Johan Temmerman.

Both of us now present the current volume, thanking all authors who contributed to this collection of essays and our respective universities and institutes for all their support, both moral and financial. We would also like to thank Lena Marken and Rebecca Eulenstein for the index of names, Mathias Kissel for his advice in the final editing of the text, our publisher Aschendorff Verlag (Münster) and their representative Leonie Kalwei and Dr. Dirk Paßmann, as well as Anna Neumann and Anne Breckner, the initial editors of the volume, for all of their work on behalf of this publication. We gratefully acknowledge the support for the publication cost by the Open Access Publication Fund of Paderborn University.

Claudia D. Bergmann, Paderborn University, and Johan Temmerman,
Faculty for Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (FPTR) Brussels.

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PREFACE

Johan Temmerman

This volume is the result of a study on religious diversity and global challenges jointly carried out by the Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (FPTR) in Brussels and the Institute of Protestant Theology at the University of Paderborn. The impetus for this research is based on a twofold observation. We observe the increasing globalization since the second half of the last century resulting in a multipolar world, in which economic and political tensions are fueled by a religious and identitarian agenda. Under this pressure, 'traditional' religions are retreating to what they see as theologically 'fundamental', and thus open the door to 'radicalization' (cf. *radix* = root!). After having conducted a study on religious *radicalism* between 2019 and 2021 at the FPTR – which led to the volume *Religious Radicalism, Demarcations and Challenges* (2021) – we forged the plan to explore, as a continuation, the concerns of religious *diversity*. This is especially interesting within the European perspective. Religious adherence has been on the rise on all continents since the turn of the millennium – except in Europe! Especially in Western and Northern Europe, faith in traditional Christianity is declining noticeably. At most, people recognize and appreciate the traditional Christian roots of European culture, but do not consider them relevant to modern society. At the same time migration increases the share of Islam in the public debate, which often ends in accusation and rejection. The sparse contact between Judaism and Christianity on the one hand and Judaism and Islam on the other is characterized by mutual ignorance and fear. With this volume we want to provide – mainly, but not exclusively, from a European perspective – impulses for a constructive dialogue between the different religions of the globalized world.

The starting point is as follows: Religious diversity is an inherent part of life. This has never been different. We know about multicultural life in the Hellenistic period and in the Greco-Roman world around the Mediterranean 2000 years ago. Also the period of Al-Andalus during the late Middle Ages is an example of multi-religious coexistence. Until fifty years ago, people in the rest of Europe were confronted with this diversity only in exceptional cases. Since then, people have come into contact with a multitude of philosophies and religions in their immediate environment on a daily basis. Our neighbors think and live differently from us, making it an important concern for the future to organize a peaceful society together. This requires not only openness but also knowledge and appreciation for something that has been alien and

even irrational to many for centuries. At the same time, we will have to succeed in creating a common framework of meaning for the future while taking into account the peculiarities and sensitivities of the other. This requires sound scientific justification.

The authors contributing to this study consider religious diversity and the global challenges for the future from a specific inside perspective. How can we contribute from different scientific-theological disciplines to a constructive dialogue between the diversity of philosophies and religions that surround us? How can we critically examine our own position and where can we find the necessary openness to bring seemingly divergent views closer together? To answer these questions, we divided the project into three working groups: (1) diversity and the church today, (2) diversity and sacred texts, focusing on Islam, and (3) diversity and society.

The first working group on diversity and the church today focused on two themes: the church order framework and the field of action of contemporary church communities. The theme of church order is elaborated in this volume by Edwin Delen, whose contribution explores the possibilities of drawing out a church order for the future in which diversity has an important place. In doing so, he finds inspiration in the theological work of Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998) who did pioneering work for the pluralistic churches in South India with regard to the unity of Church Order. Delen expands Newbigin's "committed pluralism" to include the Pauline concept of "mutual submission" (Eph 5:21), which should enable the different churches to unite in Christ while respecting their different views. This topic is also dealt with in Jo Jan Vandenheede's contribution, which takes liturgy as a starting point for "diversity catechesis". The more diverse a Christian community is, the more it reflects the global church. Vandenheede therefore argues in favour of diversity in church life in order to overcome historical tendencies towards exclusivity in the future.

The next two contributions on diversity and church life today focus on the topic of conflict in the church. Birger Falcke examines the distinction between parochial and non-parochial thinking in the Evangelical Church in Germany. The parochial church model enjoys the legitimacy of tradition and is widely accepted within the churches, but at the same time we are observing its decline. Due to its close ties to the government, this church model tends to behave like a state within the state and is thus undermining its mission. Non-parochial church models are in turn aimed at a mission-oriented community but remain rather marginal in the debate on recognition. Both models, however, can learn from each other.

Syvonia Pang Shiu Man considers a similar conflict at the other end of the global spectrum, namely the situation of Christian communities in Hong Kong. Pang Shiu Man focuses on nonviolent communication as a tool for restoring dialogue in church conflicts. In doing so, she appeals to the theory of Marshall Rosenberg (1934–2015), which she applies from a Christian perspective. Given that nonviolence is also deeply rooted in Chinese culture, this method can provide easy access to philosophical conflict management in Hong Kong. Integrating nonviolent communication into catechesis and liturgy in Hong Kong's Chinese-speaking churches can strengthen and convey the message of reconciliation. Concluding this first section on diversity and

the church today, Harald Schroeter-Wittke offers a contribution in which he describes the contemporary church in action. With the biennial Kirchentag, Christian communities in Germany succeeded in creating a place of formation in which diversity is high on the agenda. The Kirchentag is an example of how diversity within the larger church setting represents a true richness for contemporary and future faith life.

The second part of this volume deals with the theme of diversity in sacred texts focusing on the Qur'ān. Jan Van Reeth offers the notion of "subtext" in order to give theology the opportunity to consider religious experience as a phenomenon originating in the "heart". Faith is a matter of belonging, of feelings that touch our hearts and thus are constructive for the experience of a meaningful reality. No external norms can influence this. Through careful analysis, researchers can discover layers used by the editors of sacred books. For the Qur'ān in particular, Van Reeth points to a Syriac subtext with Eastern Christian background and illustrates this with some striking examples. Peter Derie expands on this approach. He argues in favour of a synergy between different approaches to sacred texts and explores the possibilities of cognitive linguistics. In doing so, he highlights the intersectional and hybrid nature of the Qur'ān which culminates in a holistic-hermeneutical model for understanding sacred texts. Following both articles, Mathias Kissel outlines Christian-Islāmic dialogue as a prototype of religious adult formation. This formation requires knowledge of various concepts of religious meaning and takes them theologically seriously, which is more than merely "tolerating" them. Especially with regard to the Islāmic tradition, this form of knowledge is indispensable for living together in diversity. Adult education does not so much aim to interpret "foreign" views but encourages the dialogue to be led by the contrasting interpretations themselves. Realizing that "everything" can also be "entirely different" is crucial in the concept Kissel describes.

In the third part of this volume, several authors explore the social tension caused by religious diversity in society. In his contribution, Jan Christian Pinsch observes the increasing influence of the far right in political life in Europe and especially in Germany, where the AfD succeeded in winning the highest number of right-wing voters since the Second World War. Pinsch notes that some parts of contemporary Christianity seem to be susceptible to religious othering and thus to right-wing populism. He illustrates his observations with slogans and posters from the AfD in which the party presents itself as the "only Christian party left". Then, Johan Temmerman analyzes the legal complications that arise when religiously inspired persons and groups take a stand against human rights. The anti-scientific attitude and rejection of the idea of progress since the 19th century gave rise to "fundamentalism" in the 20th century. Temmerman pleads for a "fundamental" *theological* reflection on Christian fundamental values and dogmas in order to prevent the further expansion of "fundamentalism" in church and in society in general.

The volume concludes with two applications of how to deal with religious diversity in the globalized world. Kelly Keasberry's contribution is a wake-up call in that it demands people to pay attention to *ecological* challenges in the context of diversity. The right to a healthy environment is a fundamental human right, and until recently has received far too little attention even within traditional religions. Keasberry

explores the intersection of religion, ecology and public life and argues for a "compassionate connection" between worldviews in order to meet compelling global challenges. These connections arise through a threefold awareness: (1) religious dialogue and diversity are essential, (2) investing in concrete interfaith dialogue, and (3) encouraging interfaith education and providing theological and philosophical underpinnings. An 'illustration' of a postmodern form of 'metropolitan spirituality' is discussed in the final article. Anne Breckner gives an account of parodies of the Lord's Prayer. She zooms in on a parody found in the London Underground that goes back to a musical version by Ian Dury (1942–2000). Parodies like this can let religious teaching appear in a new light where diversity is addressed as an inherent theme. Different forms of 'religious' art need not be mutually exclusive but, on the contrary, represent a richness in expression of religion.

The authors and compilers of this volume are concerned to dispel the fear of diversity. On a theological level the challenge of diversity does not lie on the well-trodden path along which we hear that 'all religions' profess essentially 'the same thing', but rather that diversity *as diversity* offers a deepening of our own experience, a diversity *through* which equality and harmony ultimately emerge.

PART I
DIVERSITY AND CHURCH TODAY

An ecclesiological frame for pluralism: mutual submission

Edwin Delen

Abstract

Religious diversity is not only increasing outside the church but also within churches. Globally, concerns to give room for distinctiveness and plurality within society and church are growing. Uniting and united churches have experience with plurality given the fact that they are associations of different churches and denominations. One of those is the United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB). This article describes the possibility to understand on an ecclesiological level how to frame pluralism. The missiological ecclesiology of Lesslie Newbigin gives us a good starting point with its concept of committed pluralism. It appears to need supplementing by the concept of mutual submission found in the letter to the Ephesians. Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt finally help us to understand pluralism on a practical level.

Keywords

Ecclesiology, pluralism, mutual submission, Ephesians, Lesslie Newbigin

Introduction

The church is radically and also rapidly transforming. One of the key elements in this transformation or transition is the growing diversity and plurality within the churches of the Global North (Europe and North America) and worldwide. The Global North used to be the epicenter, but now the majority of Christianity is found in Africa, Asia and Latin America.[1]

The context from which following ecclesiological thoughts emerge is the reformed or protestant tradition in the Global North, more specifically Belgium. But I hope they can be useful as a frame more largely than this context, and can help to understand and support the growing diversity and plurality in a transforming church.

The United Protestant Church in Belgium (UPCB)[2] is an association of several churches, it is a united church. Each uniting church brought its own creed to the UPCB. Each brought its own way of being church, its culture and tradition. In this

[1] Kärkkäinen, V, (2021), *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, p. 96.

[2] For a an historical outline (in German) of the UPCB see: https://de.protestant.link/die-vpkb-wer-sind-wir/ .

sense, a united church is by definition a plural church that also harbours a plurality of opinions in for example theological and ethical issues.

This plurality has led to interesting conversations in recent years, e.g. around homosexuality and new forms of being church. In 2007, the Synod of the UPCB decided that each congregation and each minister can decide for themselves whether or not to bless same-sex relationships, a decision highlighting not only the local autonomy but more importantly underlining the plurality of the church.[3]

Since the UPCB is a church in full transition with a shrinking number of congregations and members, discussions evolve around church planting, re-dynamization of congregations on the one hand, on the other hand entirely new forms of being church at the intersection of culture, society and church. These discussions are based upon different theological choices. Diversity and plurality exist within a wide range of areas of life and faith, such as spirituality, political commitment, interpretation of Scripture, and theological views. It emphasizes that the unity of the church is not based on such matters. The Lord who binds us together is stronger than what divides us.[4] One can conclude that in a plural church it is not what we believe (*fides quae)* rather than how we believe (*fides qua)* that is more important. Maybe this is why the UPCB didn't opt for a minimum of *fides quae* in a confession of faith but chose for the *fides qua* of the declaration of faith in her Constitution: We are heirs of *those who…*[5] Members of the UPCB cherish a heritage of faith in the sense of lived and handed down *fides qua* and not a text, *fides quae.*

Not only on a national or federal level the church is plural but also on its local level. Each congregation is a community harbouring different ways of believing, a diversity of cultures and in some cities, different languages. Given its minority status in the Belgian society, the UPCB is a mixture mirroring the plurality of reformed Protestantism and Belgian culture.

Belgium is a country at the fault line of Germanic and Roman cultures in Europe. It is home to three different languages, some would say, different cultures. Not only is the protestant church plural but the context in which it lives is a plural one. Although Belgium is being federalized further as a state, the UPCB stays united, which underlines the necessity of researching possible frames of plurality within a given plural cultural context, sometimes referred to as *Belgitude.* This peculiar concept refers to a

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[3] Further on, I try to define plurality in church as committed pluralism. This concept frames plurality as engaged and committed to the other and otherness, giving room actively to the other and his or her opinions. In this sense it tries to avoid the pitfall of 'anything goes' without acknowledging the position of the other.

[4] Koffeman, L, *The polity of the United and Uniting Churches,* in Doe, N (ed.), Church Laws and Ecumenism, A New Path for Christian Unity, London/New York: Routledge, p. 237.

[5] Art. 1.2 of the Constitution states: *In the fellowship of the general Church, she acknowledges being heir to those who professed their faith in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene-Constantinopel Creed, the Athanasius Creed, the Augsburg Creed, the Confessio Belgica, the Heidelberg Catechism and the 25 Articles of Faith. It places itself under the authority of Holy Scripture, which it receives through the Holy Spirit as Word of God, supreme measure of faith and life.*

Belgian attitude, a mentality.[6] A concept which is not that easy to grasp or define. The religious landscape in Belgium is a very curious case within Europe: an ever growing diversity and plurality like in other European countries but within a federalized country, trying to keep the connection between the countless expressions of religious and cultural identities.

> "Specifically in Belgium … changes are taking place in many areas and mainly have to do with increasing diversity. More than ever, we are confronted with countless expressions of religious reality that coexist. There are 166 nationalities in Brussels."[7]

The link within this cultural and religious diversity in Belgium can be described as *Belgitude*. Brussels, the capital of Belgium and Europe, endorses this *Belgitude,* an attitude to link diversity in unity: a Belgian psychology compared with a marriage in which two persons live together so long that they can't imagine living apart;[8] in a sense also mirroring the peculiar case of Europe! This link, *Belgitude,* however is not merely a formal link, it appears to be a warrant for diversity in unity, known as a Belgian compromise.[9]

Within that given context of lived plurality, the UPCB's challenge, as a Belgian church in a European context, is to be and to stay a united church, unity in diversity.

So far, little attention has been given as to how to understand this plurality ecclesiologically. Globally, there are several united churches. The World Council of Churches (WCC) even grants them a separate place in its assembly. The WCC lists 20 church families. One of them is the family of the United and Uniting Churches to which 36 member churches belong.[10] Diversity and plurality is a characteristic of United and Uniting Churches. The plurality of the UPCB as a united church is in a sense enshrined in its constitution, as we will see below.

The Reformed Church of Belgium, the Protestant Church of Belgium and the Circle "Belgium"[11] of the Reformed Churches united to form the UPCB in 1978, with this new church adopting a declaration of faith that recognizes various confessional texts of the constituent churches. A declaration, therefore, and not a confession.

What consequences this has, we read in the first article (Art. 1.2) of the Constitution of the UPCB:[12]

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6 Barnard, B, (1987), *Uitgesteld Paradijs*, Amsterdam: de Arbeiderspers, p. 52.

7 Temmerman, J (2023), 'The Paradox of Religious Populism, The Curious Case of Belgium', p. 3.

8 Dumont, H. et al.. (red.), (1989), *Belgitude et crise de l'Etat Belge*, Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, Bruxelles, p. 16.

9 Idem, p. 112.

10 https://www.oikoumene.org/church-families/united-and-uniting-churches.

11 This refers to the Dutch-speaking churches in Belgium belonging to the classis or district of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

12 https://nl.protestant.link/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/07/Constitutie-en-Kerkorde-2021-Besl-2021v2.pdf [Translation E.D.].

> "Statement of Faith signed in the solemn thanksgiving service on the occasion of the establishment of the United Protestant Church in Belgium on Saturday, November 4 1978 in Brussels.
>
> In the fellowship of the general Church, she acknowledges being heir to those who professed their faith in the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, the Creed of Athanasius, the Augsburg Creed, the Confessio Belgica, the Heidelberg Catechism and the 25 Articles of Faith. It places itself under the authority of Holy Scripture, which it receives through the Holy Spirit as the Word of God, supreme measure of faith and life."

Art. 1 of the Church Order states that:

> "The Synod Assembly, district assemblies, congregations and members of the UPCB have the task of clarifying and updating the Church's statement of faith.
>
> Within this mission there is freedom to express one's own traditions and spiritual life.

On different levels the UPCB is mandated to clarify and update the Church's statement of faith. Within this mandate, there is freedom to express one's own traditions and spiritual life. One can say that plurality belongs to the DNA of the UPCB since its origin. The UPCB declares to be an heir of *those* who confess their faith, giving room at the same time to *interpret* this confession.

How can we understand this pluralism and plurality in united churches like the UPCB ecclesiologically? Can a concept arise from this understanding, which can be manageable or inspiring for united churches like the UPCB?

A lot is being written about plurality in the society and culture of the Global North. Before we continue to try and answer this question, it is necessary to clarify the difference between plurality, pluriformity and pluralism – terms that are often used as synonyms.

What is plurality and why it is important?

Usually the terms pluralism, plurality and pluriformity are being used interchangeably, which can lead to some confusion.

I propose to reserve pluriformity for what the term says: a plurality of forms. Christians throughout history have organized themselves into an extensive diversity of different forms.[13] We can think of the diversity of forms of being church, how diversity is shaped (episcopal, congregationalist, presbytero-synodal). Within each church as an institution we find also different forms of being church.

Plurality I want to reserve for the notion that there is difference and diversity and pluralism for the way this diversity is interpreted and reflected.[14]

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[13] Wick, P (2003), *Die Urchristliche Gottesdienste*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

[14] De Reuver, R (2004), *Eén kerk in meervoud, Een theologisch onderzoek naar de ecclesiologische waarde van pluraliteit,* Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, p. 32.

Plurality refers to the *fact* of diversity,[15] while pluralism refers to the *consciousness* of diversity.[16]

The World Council of Churches (WCC), in his report *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, underlines the importance of diversity and plurality. Diversity and plurality are part of the Church:

> *"Diversity appears not as accidental to the life of the Christian community, but as an aspect of its catholicity, a quality that reflects the fact that it is part of the Father's design that the story of salvation in Christ be incarnational."*[17]

Diversity in unity and unity in diversity are gifts of God to the church.[18]

> "Authentic diversity in the life of communion must not be stifled: authentic unity must not be surrendered. Each local church must be the place where two things are simultaneously guaranteed: the safeguarding of unity and the flourishing of a legitimate diversity. … Unity, particularly when it tends to be identified with uniformity, can be destructive of authentic diversity…"[19]

On the other hand, plurality can and does also drive renewal in the church.[20]

Today, denominational and ethical diversity within the church is a major challenge. How are we to think unity within diversity, and where is the place for freedom within it?

Confessional and ethical deliberation is a process of freedom of the individual rather than the conforming to pre-given structures and solutions. The fear of relativism puts some churches in a spasm where an identarian solution is sought that exhorts members to conform to denominational and ethical frameworks that are pre-given.

So how to deal with diversity while giving people the freedom to express their values and thoughts with respect?

A minimal basis of unity and staged plurality gives the church opportunities to renew itself and makes it flexible in an increasingly challenging cultural and social context. Plurality is creating conditions for being church in the 21st century, a motivation for renewal. This plurality is best reflected and organized if somehow framed. What is a possible frame of thought for plurality in the UPCB and more broadly?

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[15] With the term 'manyness' I try to describe the multitude or plethora of different forms and shapes.

[16] Plantinga, RJ (ed) 1999, *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary readings,* Oxford/Malden MA: Blackwell Publishers, p. 6.

[17] *The Nature and the Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order paper 198, p. 6, https://ecumenism.net/archive/wcc/2005_wcc_fo_nature_mission_church_en.pdf.

[18] Idem, p. 15.

[19] Idem, p. 17.

[20] Painter-Morland, M (2001), 'Dealing with difference and dissensus within the church as organization', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, vol. 22, no. 1.

Pluralism understood ecclesiologically: Lesslie Newbigin's committed pluralism.

For this exercise, the understanding of plurality in an ecclesiological sense, it suffices to note that unity in religion and ethics has been problematized since the epistemological shift after the Enlightenment.[21] From then on, spiritual and ethical concepts are founded on reason and arise from freedom. The foundation of spiritual concepts lies in our thinking. Humanity's will is free and universal in the sense that it applies to all reasonable beings, i.e. human beings. That free will, being reasonable, submits itself in its thinking to a universally valid categorical imperative, universally valid because reasonable. But the elaboration of that imperative can in a subjective way, in practice that is, give rise to a diversity of actions, on other words: unity in diversity.

For us, two thoughts are important. Plurality arises when reason becomes the instrument by which ethical and religious concepts are understood, since the assumption in a practical sense of reason is the freedom of the will, the autonomy of the human being. That free will submits to ethical laws voluntarily. This is the paradox of freedom that gives space to plurality in a practical sense and, at the same time, to the unity of that plurality, a unity that can be found in reason itself.

This epistemological framework grounded in the autonomy of humanity voluntarily submitting to what lies outside the self allows us to appreciate plurality in a positive way.

Although being the subject, with Kant, seeks refuge in the inwardness of reason:

> "Kant permanently immunizes himself against an outside … Everything is meant to be put under the spell of the subject's inner world – this is the categorical imperative of Kant's thought."[22]

So how should we understand this theologically or ecclesiologically?

What if, given this epistemological shift which Kant describes, a commitment to the outside and the wholly other is thinkable and even possible, in which the subject doesn't immunizes itself for the other? Lesslie Newbigin appears to give us inspiration.

James Edward Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998) shaped the church in South-India and worked for its unity as a missionary. He served this church for more than 38 years, before he returned to England. He was also involved as a general secretary of the WCC. Newbigin is best known for his contributions to missiology and ecclesiology. He is also known for his involvement in the dialogue regarding ecumenism. Many scholars also believe his work laid the foundations for the contemporary missional church movement.

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[21] You can understand the epistemological shift after the Enlightenment concretely from the thoughts of I. Kant as articulated in Kant, I (2015) *Critique of Practical Reason*, Cambridge University Press.

[22] Han, Byung-Chul (2018), *Saving Beauty*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 40–41.

I 'd like to emphasize Newbigin's thoughts for his missionary ecclesiology which can be fruitful for our research. Since Newbigin as missionary theologian accounted for the plurality in the European culture and appreciates this plurality theologically in a positive sense and as essential for the church, his thinking is important for our research on plurality.[23] Newbigin also has broad experiences in a uniting and united plural church, the church of India.[24]

Newbigin tries to understand plurality, given the epistemological shift described in the previous paragraph. He attempts to understand the evident pluralism in society theologically for the church context and observes that, given the separation of facts and values, facts are judged according to reason belonging to the public sphere and values by faith in the private sphere. Pluralism in the world of values leads to relativism and subjectivism. Newbigin rejects the dichotomy between reason and faith to seek a pluralism that can be positively valued. The context in which Newbigin thinks and seeks to understand pluralism is the public sphere. I am trying to understand his thoughts on plurality and pluralism within the ecclesiological context.

Newbigin distinguishes between religious or agnostic pluralism and cultural pluralism. The former is the idea that religions are *perceptions* of truth, but no *criterion* of the same, because religion belongs to the private sphere. Cultural pluralism is the obvious plurality of different cultures which is not the same as a plurality of religions and values. He sees this pluralism as an enrichment, cultural diversity preserves the church from absolutizing its own form and stature. Against religious pluralism, he posits what he calls committed pluralism. The objectifying rational concept of truth from the world of facts is now, in an agnostic pluralism opposed to the subjectifying concept of truth in the world of values. Committed pluralism seeks understanding of truth that applies to both values and facts, what he calls a fiduciary framework, based on trust. This framework then becomes the lens through which you look at society. Committed in this sense means entrusting yourself to Christ.

Newbigin elaborates his thoughts, as stated, with a view to the church in society. I'd like to use his thinking within the context of pluralism in the church. In this sense, the idea of committed pluralism and the positive appreciation of cultural pluralism is fruitful within the church context. The diversity and plurality of styles and thoughts find their finality in a commitment, in a fiduciary framework.[25] The attempt to transcend the dichotomy between fact and value with the concept of trust, i.e. on what is given to us as believers, and also the dichotomy between public and private sphere, is an added value.

Committed pluralism as unity in diversity. But how to achieve this commitment? How do these different believers and churches arrive at a commitment, at this fiduciary framework?

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[23] Newbigin, L (1989), *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, London: Eerdmans.

[24] Newbigin, L (2011), *The reunion of the Church, A Defence of the South India Scheme,* Oregon: Wipf & Stock.

[25] De Reuver (2004), p. 263.

Newbigin understands the unity as a commitment to Christ and plurality and diversity as the personal articulation of this commitment. Both presuppose each other: this is committed pluralism. Unity without plurality degenerates into uniformity, and plurality without unity degenerates into relativism.

But is this commitment to Christ enough to serve as a foundation for the given plurality? Can commitment to Christ serve plurality within the church? And how to understand its unity? Newbigin states that the unity of the church is a spiritual one:

> "Our unity with one another in Christ does not consist in our agreement regarding certain doctrines. Nor in our common assent to certain moral principles. It consists in our sharing in a live of mutual love and trust…"[26]

I'd like to interpret this mutual trust – or mutual commitment – as mutual submission to safeguard the plurality.

Committed pluralism in a sense highlights a relationship of faith (*fides qua,* not *fides quae).* But this commitment is not enough for a needed reciprocity within a plural church. How to relate to one another if commitment starts as a personal choice? You commit yourself to Christ, but what then is your relationship to your fellow believers? This commitment has to be supplemented, broadened and limited by a commitment to the other. Otherwise, how can your own personal choice be limited by the choice(s) of the other?

Mutual reciprocity is important for understanding plurality in an ecclesiological sense. The commitment has to be broadened – or limited – by what I would like to call submission. It has to be limited not by doctrines but by persons.

Unlike with commitment as a personal choice, with submission the active role lies with the other. The choices of the other limit your own understanding and choice. It is evident that to safeguard plurality, the active role and the initiative lies with the other.

How to engage, how to connect with the other? How to understand, frame and live plurality?

> "Faith in Christ generates a commitment to association with others who believe and empowers the believer to engage in the responsibilities of personal encounter. The life of faith is a life of fellowship."[27]

A personal encounter is what is important in trying to understand plurality in the church. You submit yourself to this personal encounter.

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[26] Newbigin, L (2011), *The reunion of the Church, A defence of the South India Scheme,* Oregon: Wipf and Stock, p. 52.

[27] Sherman, MS (2010), Ut Omnes Unum Sint: The Case for Visible Church Reunion in the Ecclesiology of Bishop J.E. Lesslie Newbigin, Lampeter: University of Wales, p. 126.

Mutual submission in Eph 5:21: *submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*[28]

One who understood this is Paul, the author [29] of the letter to the Ephesians, which inspired me to use the word submission. So, the answer is given in Scripture where commitment is understood as submission: a submission to Christ and to the other. I would like to use Eph 5:21-33 as an inspiration to rethink Newbigin's concept of committed pluralism ecclesiologically.

The passage belongs to the broader context where the author addresses what it means to live 'in Christ', i.e. committed to Christ. Grammatically, the word 'to submit' in Eph 5:21 is the fourth Greek participle following the command 'be filled with the Spirit' in Eph 5:18. It therefore doesn't only refer to the relationship between man and woman, discussed after Eph 5:21 but more broadly to the church at large as a communion filled with the Spirit.[30]

This passage[31] is a unit given the inclusion of verse 21 and verses 32–33. Verses 22–24 are a separate unit from verses 25–31. The concepts of fear, love and submission are thus linked and, at the same time living in Christ, a code of conduct: What the author says about human behavior he says about the church (verse 32). There is a clear analogy between the church's submission to Christ and our submission to each other (verse 24). An analysis of verses 25 to 31 shows that submission is seen as love.

For this topic, the concept of mutual submission is important insofar as it is used within a believer's code of conduct and within a church context: Submission to Christ is submission to one another, this in view of the church. One can understand and interpret submission as non-hierarchical act of voluntary and mutual yielding or complying to the other.[32] In this sense, one can interpret commitment to Christ within a biblical theological frame as submitted.

What does this passage have to do with pluralism? Quite a bit: However different the codes of behavior in society are, culturally and ethically, in the church believers do it this way: submitted to each other, mutually. The author of the letter to the Ephesians tries diversity into within a Christian congregation in Ephesus, and this 'in Christ' he elaborates with practical and concrete examples of behavior. Living 'in

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[28] English Standard Version 2016.

[29] I'm aware that scientifically there's a consensus that the letter to the Ephesians is not written by Paul. Therefore I will use further on: author (of the letter to the Ephesians). The letter to the Ephesians is part of a number of circular letters intended for congregations in Asia Minor and originating from Ephesus: N.T. Wright & M.F. Bird (2019), *The New Testament and its World. An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, p. 469.

[30] Newbigin, L (1953), *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church,* London: SCM Press, p. 34.

[31] Mutter, K (2018). 'Ephesians 5:21-33 as Christian Alternative Discourse', TRINJ, vol. 39NS, pp. 3–20.

[32] Johnson, A (2003). *A Christian Understanding of Submission, A Nonhierarchical-complementarian viewpoint,* Priscilla Papers, CBE International.

Christ' is how you do it, namely submitted to him. He does not flesh out the unity principle, you are simply committed to Christ, nothing more.

You submit yourself[33] to Christ and to one another. In this sense the author's universalism – a believer's identity is based on his submission to Christ – converges with plurality.[34] Unity presumes diversity and plurality.[35] The community living in Christ doesn't base its identity on cultural or other differences but solely on Christ. Its identity cannot be traced back to cultural or theological differences. In its cultural and theological plurality and diversity, it is universal. Unity presumes plurality, and submission to Christ presumes submission to each other. One cannot exist without the other.

The Church Father Cyprian (200–258) argued in the footsteps of the author of the letter to the Ephesians that unity of the Church takes shape in the relationship with Christ and with each other. In that sense unity and diversity, the plurality of believers marked by the communion with each other go together. Unity and plurality are ecclesiologically not separate from each other.[36]

How far have we come?

Given the epistemological shift where, for notions such as pluralism, reason appeared to be the instrument of the autonomous self to subject itself by virtue of its free will to moral laws that can lead to a plurality of practical elaborations – the paradox of freedom that allows for a healthy plurality – Kant already showed that submission to what lies outside the individual, even within the context of autonomy and diversity, is a notion that cannot be avoided. This epistemological shift distinguishing between facts and values led Newbigin to understand pluralism as agnostic or committed. Agnostic pluralism assumes that the world of values is faith-based, subjective and therefore not objectifiable. He proposes to transcend this dichotomy between fact and value with the concept of commitment which could be a fiduciary frame, based on trust in what we are given in terms of truth, rather than subjectivizing and relativizing them as unknowable. I want to interpret this commitment within the ecclesiological context as submission since the commitment is not concrete or elaborate enough to be useful to understand pluralism in the church. It does give the insight that pluralism has the need to refer to something outside itself to be useful for unity in diversity thinking, a fiduciary framework. I found this frame in Eph 5:21 where the

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[33] The verb used in the text is a middle and therefore translated as submit yourself. See Mutter (2018): p.13.

[34] Van der Heijden, G-J (2018), *Het uitschot en de geest, Paulus onder de filosofen,* Nijmegen: Vantilt, p. 214 and Halik, T (2023), *De namiddag van het christendom,* Utrecht: Kok Boekencentrum, p. 18.

[35] De Reuver, R (2012), *Anders verder, missionair kerk-zijn in een dynamische samenleving,* Amsterdam: Ark Media, p. 122.

[36] De Reuver, R (2004), p. 208.

commitment to Christ and to each other is related as a unity under the rubric of submission. How do you organize your church? Well, in submitted pluralism.

Of course, this submitted pluralism has to work. How do you deal with pluralism in the church? Now that we have a frame – submitted pluralism – it is important to also make this frame work in practice.

Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt lead the way

I 'd like to use the thinking of Martin Buber (1878–1965)[37] and Hannah Arendt (1906–1975)[38] to try and understand how plurality can work in a practical sense in church. Buber's thoughts can give us a frame to relate to the personal encounter and submission to one another. Arendt's thoughts can give us a frame how to cope with diversity and plurality and how to cope with dissensus.

In Buber's thinking[39] the relationship between humans and God is the foundation for the mutual relationship of human beings. In the other, you meet the Other, although this Other always remains unknowable. Buber, this aside, wanted to avoid the possibility of understanding, grasping the Other so that He becomes an It.

Thus there are two possible relationships in which the I can position itself, two basic models of relating to the world, the I–You relationship and the I–It relationship, both of which affect the I. One only becomes I through the encounter with the other, who is You. The I that stands in relation to the world, the It, is a different I than the I of the relationship of I–You. The relationship with the other makes you human through encounter, openness and reciprocity. It is in a fundamental sense an ethical one.

You do not objectify the other, because then you get the I–It relationship.

The relationship with God exists through I–You encounter. You meet God, the Other, through your relationship with the other. God leaves you freedom to choose God and at the same time you take the freedom to be constrained by God's presence. Submission – Buber does not put it explicitly – is implicit in this, I think. You can meet the other and the Other only if you are willing in your relationship to be constrained by the other/Other. Real encounter presupposes the acceptance of the other in his or her plurality and diversity.

How to relate to the other within a plural context? You don't relate to a *position* or a *thought*, a theory, but to a *person* holding that position, and that encounter with the other is transformational. But this can only be so if the other is not being regarded as someone holding a position or an idea, but as a person, not as an It but as a You.

Mutuality, love, submission – the connection Buber sees between the other and the Other, the ethical consequences of the encounter with the other and the Other, and

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[37] Buber, M (2002), *Das dialogische Prinzip,* Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

[38] Arendt, H (2018), *The Human Condition,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[39] Buber, M (2002), 'Ich und Du' in: *Das dialogische Prinzip,* Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

not least the connection between ethics and religion, are elements of his thinking that can be linked to what the author of the letter to the Ephesians states.

Buber sees the relationship by which, as an I–You or an I–It, you encounter the world as fundamental to your relationship to the world. In this sense, you could say that, like Newbigin, he makes an attempt to transcend the dichotomy between fact and value, through the relation with which you face the world.

More recently, Hartmut Rosa tried to understand the relationship with one another as resonance. In this context he states that relatedness is the first and most fundamental aspect of all human existence in Buber's thinking.[40] It is only through the encounter of a responsive You that the subject, the I, becomes itself and finds actual life, a transformational encounter in which both I and You are changed.

Rosa even elaborates on the concept of resonance using Buber's thinking, describing that deep vertical resonance can be found in the horizontal axe of resonance in a Christian community and diagonal relationships. He writes that the Christian cross can be reinterpreted in terms of resonance theory as symbolizing the connection of horizontal and vertical axes of resonance.[41]

Mutual submission to Christ and to each other, both, vertical and horizontal, as the author describes in Ephesians 5:21.

> "The power of the action of resonance is bound in the mystery of plurality and unity."[42]

Resonance, connection, encounter, mutual submission to the other and the Other describe the possibility of consensus in a Christian community or church, but plurality presupposes dissensus also. How to cope with dissensus?

In that context Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) describes a praxis of plurality giving room for dissensus in our mutual submission. In her book *The Human Condition*,[43] Arendt describes plurality as essential for *vita activa*, the political arena, and with the aid of our imagination, we can see the political as the church.

Praxis of plurality is essential, how to live plurality in a practical sense? I'd like to give just a few key thoughts.

Totalitarian thinking reduces the heterogeneity and plurality of humankind to a homogeneous mass. It is through the reassertion of plurality that humanity can safeguard itself against totalitarian domination of the future.[44] "Plurality is specifically the condition – not only the condition sine qua non, but the conditio per quam – of all political life."[45] With this plurality is given a twofold character: equality and dis-

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40 Rosa, H (2022), *Resonance, A sociology of Our Relationship to the World,* Medford: Polity, p. 260.

41 Idem, p. 263.

42 Root, A (2022), *Churches and the Crisis of Decline, A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age,* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, p. 173.

43 Arendt, H (2018), *The Human Condition,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

44 Nixon, J (2015), *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship,* London: Bloomsbury, p. 25.

45 Arendt, H (2018), *The Human Condition,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 7.

tinction,[46] "because we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else …"[47]

Humanity presupposes plurality. Arendt sees and has experienced friendship as the praxis of plurality. Friendship as a voluntary, mutual relationship recognizes the equality and distinctiveness of the other, friendship as a relationship exists in plurality.[48]

Therefore, the author of the letter to the Ephesians tries to understand plurality in the context of equality of all Christians – what makes us equal before God, as humans in Christ, but distinct as we are – as the question of how to act within the Church concretely.

The only thing that can channel the 'unpredictability' of plurality of the human condition, and thus its freedom, and function as a bulwark, is the promise, the commitment. The promise or the commitment sets limits to unpredictability, what today would be called safety or security.[49] The heterogeneous flux of human plurality, inherent in freedom, is bounded by the commitment. This reminds us of Newbigin's committed pluralism. The commitment must not lead to the erasure of heterogeneity into homogeneity, or of freedom in favor of absolute equality, for then you deny plurality. Limiting plurality for the sake of viability, can only be done by the "many bound together".[50]

How to limit and bind plurality is a question common to Ephesians and Arendt. Arendt underlines the importance and also the weakness of this plurality and tries to understand and limit it with a view to the public sphere. More importantly, she underlines equality and distinctiveness made possible by plurality and gives room to dissensus in that sense.

In a similar sense, Jürgen Moltmann understands the church as a fellowship, more particularly as a fellowship of friends. He elaborated a theology of friendship that underlines in the same sense as Arendt does the importance of friendship for the public sphere. For Moltmann, the church is a free society of equals, an open fellowship of friends.[51] The church is a communion of equals. "Open and total friendship that goes out to meet the other is the spirit of the kingdom in which God comes to man and man to man."[52]

Living 'in Christ' as a fellowship of friends[53] is also a participation in the public sphere – a relatedness to the Other and the other. An open church, is a fellowship of friends, of committed Christians.

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46 Idem, p.175.

47 Idem, p.8.

48 Nixon, J (2015), *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Friendship*, London: Bloomsbury, p. 28.

49 Idem, p. 47.

50 Arendt, H (2018), *The Human Condition,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 245.

51 Kärkkäinen, V (2021), *An Introduction to Ecclesiology,* Illinois: InterVarsity Press, p. 64.

52 Moltmann, J (1978), *The Open Church: Invitation to a Messianic Life-Style,* London: SCM Press, p. 121.

53 Kärkkäinen, V (2021), *An Introduction to Ecclesiology,* Illinois: InterVarsity Press, p. 65.

In this sense, Moltmann's theology of friendship within his ecclesiology of the church as a fellowship resonates with the thoughts of Newbigin's committed pluralism as well as with Buber's dialogical thinking and Arendt's thoughts on friendship and plurality.

Newbigins committed pluralism helps us to understand and frame plurality ecclesiologically. Our commitment to Christ and to each other safeguards equality, which tends to be important in a praxis of plurality as Arendt describes. This equality and commitment come to live in a personal encounter with the other and the Other, as Buber has shown. Diversity and distinctiveness, the other focal point of the praxis of plurality, as Arendt taught us, is being safeguarded by the concept of mutual submission, a term found in the letter to the Ephesians. Moltmann describes this as a fellowship of friends, an open church. This is in a nutshell what could be an ecclesiological framework for plurality in church.

Conclusion

Thinking about plurality and pluralism is relevant for the churches in transition today and also in a global and globalizing religious context. As the world gets smaller and more cultures with specific experiences of religion and Christian spirituality come into contact with each other, it will be necessary in the future to enshrine plurality in church polity as well. As indicated in this contribution, Eph 5:21 provides the occasion for this ecclesiological broadening.

I tried to described such a pluralistic ecclesiological framework for pluralism in church. Committed pluralism, as Newbigin suggests, and mutual submission safeguard unity and diversity within churches. Plurality on an ecclesiological level can be understood as mutual submission. This means interpreting commitment in an ecclesiological context as submission, because in a shared commitment to faith in Christ, submission is the concrete rendition of devotion (Eph 5).

In turn, the thinking of Martin Buber and Hannah Arend allow distinctive experience (Arendt) and even disagreement (Buber) to have a place in the praxis of pluralism. On a practical level, the consensus is made possible by the personal encounter based on the dialogical principles of Martin Buber, dissensus is framed within the praxis of plurality in Arendt's thinking, highlighting the importance of distinctiveness.

What I tried to describe in this article is a framework which can be put in practice in a given context. The context I employ in this contribution is that of the UPCB in Belgium, which bears remarkable similarities to Church of South India for which Newbigin designs the concept of committed pluralism. In both denominations, pluralism is inscribed from its origins, because when different denominations decide to form a united church and share their faith, it necessarily presupposes a diversity of perceptions. In Eph 5:21, I find the ecclesiological inspiration to complement Newbigin's committed pluralism with the concept of mutual submission. This is not a blueprint, just a framework. Each church is different, ecclesiology cannot be disengaged of lived and concrete faith and context, culture and people.

Plurality in a global ecclesiastical context can benefit from further rethinking ecclesiology, and a church polity giving room for committed pluralism and mutual submission which can give room for distinctiveness. This also allows us to implement Buber's dialogical principle that frames dissensus in a praxis of pluralism, and emphasize the importance of distinction.

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I–Together: Liturgy as locus for 'Diversity Catechesis'

Jo Jan Vandenheede

Abstract

In this article, I look into the possibility of the liturgy as a locus for 'diversity catechesis', or 'learning diversity'. I do so in the framework of Lutheran theology; parallel to the welcoming and affirmation, or not, of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Looking at both the universal and contextual of liturgy, I offer a methodology for studying diversity in the liturgy from different angles as well as suggest techniques and methodologies from other academic disciplines to potentially learn (with)in, from, and about diversity and then put it into liturgical practice. I posit that the well-being of the participants in the liturgy is a way to measure the success of diversity.

Keywords

Liturgy, diversity, catechesis, Lutheran, LGBTQIA+, homophily, universality, contextuality, intersectionality

Introduction

Each individual is an intersection of multiple identities ('intersectionality'), both in how they themselves experience and express these identities, as in how others identify them, whether or not others differentiate between the various identities present. 'Identity' in this article means "the fact of being, or feeling that you are a particular type of person, organization, etc.; [and] the qualities that make a person, organization, etc. different from others" (Cambridge Dictionary), not 'nationality', as in the passport a person holds.

Intersectionality has expanded and become more complex – to much heated debate – as Anne Sisson Runyan describes,

> "Intersectional theory has also traveled across more identity borders. Although [Kimberlé] Crenshaw's early work centered on heterosexual immigrant women of color, intersectional theory is now applied to understanding how we all carry multiple, albeit constructed and provisional, identities. The salience of such identities […][1] varies in different times and contexts, conferring either disadvantages or privileges on each of

[1] To save space, I left out the many examples summed up, respectively, in the quotes from Sisson Runyan, Rebenstorf, and Jahnel.

> us, again in relation to time and context. This recognition has gone a long way toward disrupting hierarchies of oppression […]. In this way, intersectional thinking has also opened the way to more inclusive and coalitional social movements and agendas." (Sisson Runyan 2018)

Hilke Rebenstorf, for her part, points out that the "hierarchy of the different partial identities results from the individual meanings (salience) attributed to these partial identities", and these can be "activated" according to context, but also "ascribed", in which case countering this characterization or prejudice becomes very difficult (Rebenstorf 2023:29-30).

These "partial identities" can also include a religious or 'lifestance' identity. This term, inspired by the Flemish-Belgian legal definition *levensbeschouwing*, includes religions in the sociological and historical sense (e.g. Christianity), more broadly spiritual views and practices (e.g. certain schools of Buddhism), as well as agnostic/atheist positions. Yet, others of that same lifestance group may refuse to acknowledge this shared belonging because of an individual's possible other identities/particularities, like their sexual orientation, which the majority decide nullifies the shared lifestance marker. This causes tensions between individuals, as well as between identities within an individual.

One of the places where these tensions may be felt is the liturgy, that public place and time when a faith-community expresses its corporate religious identity according to certain accepted and fixed procedures or rites in a specific order or sequence (*ordo*): homogeneity and uniformity, at least outwardly, are given priority. Martin Luther King writes that he was appalled that "the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing, 'In Christ there is no East nor West'" (King 1958:206). Meaning, that Segregation America worshipped, and very often still worships, in a segregated way, and not just the case for the USA. King acknowledged his inspiration for the quote from a lecture by Helen Kenyon a few years prior (*The New York Times* 1952:26).
I will be applying the following two parameters,

1. Denominational

I will be applying the liturgical framework and theology of Lutheran Christianity. At present, the numerical majority of Lutherans are found in the Northern Hemisphere though the two largest single church-bodies can be found in Ethiopia and Tanzania. The largest international Lutheran body is the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), founded in 1947, which represents ca. 90% of global Lutheranism. Around 83% of its member-churches ordain women to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.[2]

Martin Luther (1483–1546), in his *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), considered prayer, public praise and thanksgiving, or liturgy, both private and public, one of the seven marks of the Church (*Marks of the Body of Christ* 1999). Lutheranism, therefore, is categorized as a liturgical denomination, like Roman Catholicism, An-

[2] Information available at www.lutheranworld.org.

glicanism and Orthodoxy. It follows a liturgical year, and uses set recurring orders for worship (*ordinarium*) complemented by formulas specific for certain occasions (*proprium*). Local and regional variations do exist, however, "this fidelity [to the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments] can be and is lived out in numerous and richly diverse ceremonial ways, in different rites – distinct ecclesial traditions – throughout the world" (Johnson 2015:406).

It is also a confessional Christianity that executes its theology through its liturgies which vary in this execution all over the globe. To summarize, "[l]iturgical practice embodies theology" (Lange 2017:428).

Additionally, it is a denomination that historically prides itself in its emphasis on religious education at home and in the parish. Luther's *Small Catechism* (1529) remains, until this day, a staple for those preparing for Confirmation or those interested in joining a Lutheran congregation.

2. LGBTQIA+[3]

Parallel to this, I will be focusing on the inclusion of LGBT+ people as this has been the main source of inter-church and intra-church contention for the last two decades, also within the LWF. Their discrimination runs analogous to the exclusion of other marginalized groups. The debate includes wider discussions on sex and gender, the role and hierarchical position of women and those identifying as women in the churches, the intergenerational differences about the affirmation of LGBT+ people, and disenfranchised groups in general, and the role of language, especially in the development of liturgical praxis, and the manner in which speaking about the divine has a direct impact on the welcoming of marginalized individuals.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor and public theologian of the ELCA[4], and an outspoken ambassador for historic yet inclusive Lutheranism, relates the following anecdote when speaking to a friend about the Church and sexuality, "Why do you think it is that the church has tried to control human sexuality so much throughout the ages?" He answered, "I guess I always assumed the church saw sex as its competition." (Bolz-Weber 2019:20-21)

It points to two reactions that the Church seems to have when discussing sexuality and gender, reticence – some would argue, prudishness – and control or power over people's (intimate) lives, even their very being.

Research questions, working hypothesis

On the one hand, in our present-day Western society, religion is perceived as a private affair between the individual and God. On the other hand, religion has a socio-cultural collective character and role. Liturgy can combine both and comment on

[3] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, plus others. Sometimes '2S' for Two Spirit is added to include indigenous peoples and First Nations. In this article, I will be using the shortened acronym LGBT+.

[4] Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the largest Lutheran church-body in the USA.

both because a liturgy is a collection of individuals and 'work for the people' (*λειτουργία*), an event individuals undertake together (I–Together), just as much as a *Gottesdienst* is 'a service for God', when congregants attend a faith-community of their choice, or – to put it differently – one that aligns with their own identity-profile. This same public liturgy, in many cases, has become the only opportune moment, environment and process for religious education as well, sometimes just for practical reasons. One example of that educational potential, as it were, are the rubrics (traditionally in red print) in liturgy books or pew sheets, naming the separate parts of the order, and what a person is supposed to do and say at that point: one learns how 'to do liturgy'.

What does this tell us about the tension between the universality and the contextuality of liturgy, i.e. the communally accepted praxis, in relation to an individual's needs and expectations set in their intersectionality, i.e. their particularities? How does the liturgy proclaim and explain the universality of the teachings and ministries of the Church and the churches? All the while, inviting, as a faith-community in its own context, people with identities differing from the prevailing norm, notably members from various marginalized (sub)groups, to learn about, from, and with them. Could the liturgy be a locus for this 'learning diversity' or 'diversity catechesis'? I posit that inclusivity and diversity can be seen as gauges of universality as well as contextuality. If we approach liturgy as a tertiary service, for instance, then well-being or personal growth – different from customer satisfaction! – of its participants is an indicator for success, so to speak, and this on a variety of human levels.

Liturgy as catechetical locus

Contextual liturgy: a confessional principle

In 1526, Luther published his *Deutsche Messe*, a fully German-language eucharistic liturgy. In his introduction, Luther pointed out that his revision of the Latin Mass, *Formula missae et communionis* (1523), should still be used with the students at the university of Wittenberg. The simplified German Mass was meant for the townsfolk (Lange 2017:429). In other words, the language of the liturgy depended on the intended target congregation, the intended 'consumers' of said liturgy. In 1530, furthermore, the reformers presented a document to Charles V (r. 1519–1556) at the Imperial Diet in Augsburg. Article 7, 'The Church', of this *Augsburg Confession* states that "[i]t is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be the same everywhere" (CA VII §3). The contextuality of the liturgy is, as such, a Lutheran confessional principle: The context in which a particular liturgy is celebrated directly influences, in varying degrees, the form of the liturgy. This principle is anchored in several theological writings from the Reformation Era.

However, while Luther remained reticent in mandating any overarching guidelines for the reforming movement's new liturgies, the political class started demanding more liturgical uniformity within their own lands. This was a direct result of the

Peace of Augsburg in 1555, which allowed the ruler of a specific territory within the Holy Roman Empire to decide on the church-affiliation of their subjects (*cuius regio eius religio*). A prime example of this trend happened in 1817, when the King of Prussia decreed that his Reformed and Lutheran subjects join together in one United Church in Prussia with its own united liturgy. Many Lutherans refused and emigrated to the U.S. laying the foundation for a global conservative and confessionalist movement (Gritsch 2010:182-183) which today represents ca. 10–15% of World Lutheranism, rejects the ordination of women, and is non-affirming of LGBT+ people. In the U.S., until the early 1910s, its conservatism was even characterized by the use of German in worship, associating English with doctrinal laxity and liberal unionism (*ibid*.:193, 199). Liturgy was, and often still is, an arena for theological controversy.

Liturgy: (n)ever (un)changing

Anita Stauffer alerts us that the interplay between worship and culture "is a subject on which everyone has an opinion and many emotions" (Stauffer 1996:7). The argument that things are the way they are because they have always been that way or been done that way, is a disingenuous one, both historically and liturgically though it must be acknowledged that change, gradual as well as more radical, causes liturgical anxiety for many.

Dom Anscar Chupungco's definition of "inculturation" gives us an indication of what well-being and integration of the participants could mean as a measuring tool for this success of diversity. It also has a pedagogical element to it, as well as describing an outward expression of diversity:

> "Inculturation properly understood and rightly executed should lead the assembly to more profound appreciation of Christ's mystery made present in the celebration by the dynamic mediation of cultural signs and symbols. Inculturation, in other words, should aim to deepen the spiritual life of the assembly through a fuller experience of Christ who reveals himself in the people's language, rites, arts, and symbols. If inculturation does not do this, it remains a futile exercise." (Chupungco 1996:77–78)

Chupungco concluded that "the liturgical *ordo* necessarily includes such values as hospitality, community spirit, and leadership" (*ibid*.:82). I suppose that it necessarily includes, therefore, diversity. Stauffer, also working with Chupungco's formulation, further defined "contextualization" and "localization" as "the use or echo of local cultural and naturel elements in worship and the space in which it occurs" (Stauffer 1996:15).

> "The core of the liturgy is a supracultural reality which the Church received through apostolic preaching and preserves intact in every time and place. What inculturation means is that worship assimilates the people's language, ritual, and symbolic patterns. In this way the people are able to claim and own the liturgical core…" *(ibid*.:12).

Nonetheless, the debate continues on who gets to decide on said context.

So, within Lutheranism's context, the first non-White pastor was Jehu Jones Jr, ordained in the U.S. in 1832; and its first woman pastor was Jantine Auguste Haumersen, ordained in the Netherlands in 1929 (Lohrmann 2021:138, 184). Since the start of the 21st century, more and more Lutheran church-bodies have likewise opened the ordained Ministry to out (and partnered) LGBT+ individuals and have approved equal marriage liturgies.

Regardless of who is allowed to preside at a liturgy, the 20th century has seen many changes that have 'updated' the worship service in a number of denominations: the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), the introduction of the vernacular, a higher participation of lay people in liturgical roles, often because of a lack of clergy, new liturgical styles with modern instruments, megachurches with a theatrical liturgy, and contemporary movements, e.g. Fresh Expressions, Messy Church, Taizé, etc. (cf. Dekker & Stoffels 2011:114–115; cf. de Kock & Verboom 2012:162–163). However, many of these new liturgies, in the vernacular, with a modern slant, or which are participatory/lay-led are not necessarily welcoming, accessible or affirming. Evangelicalism, for example, frequently characterized by a non-historic liturgy, has a misogynistic and homophobic reputation, and the *Novus Ordo* of Vatican II still does not allow for female priests or deacons. This has led to many individuals seeking spirituality pick and mix elements from various traditions to combine them into a personalized, syncretized, and commercialized liturgical expression (cf. de Kock & Verboom 2012:162–163) often ignoring the theological and denominational framework. But a non-denominational congregation and liturgy does not automatically mean an inclusive congregation and liturgy.

Diversity catechesis

'Catechesis', from the Greek *κατήχησις* ('instruction'), and the study thereof, is a subdiscipline of Practical Theology. Jos de Kock and his colleagues define catechesis as "the set of consciously designed goal-oriented educational activities for young and old in the congregation, aimed at learning how to live and believe as disciples of Christ" (de Kock & Verboom 2012:16[5]), and while it only distinguishes between generational groups, it can be broadened to cover other distinct groupings as well.

'Catechesis' is a very ecclesiastical word and directly connects to our question about inclusivity as catechesis is often necessary, for instance, to become a member (e.g. Baptism) or to change the status of, or advance in, membership (e.g. Confirmation, Holy Communion). In the aftermath of the Covid-pandemic, many congregations are still struggling, not only to increase the numbers of people attending in-person services, often still offering hybrid worship, but also to re-start a range of social and catechetical activities which used to be organized for their parishioners and others.

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[5] The original Dutch reads *…het geheel van bewust opgezette doelgerichte leeractiviteiten voor jong en oud in de gemeente, met het oog op leren leven en geloven als leerlingen van Christus* (transl. JJV).

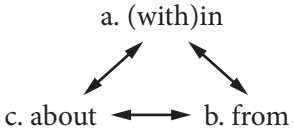
So, how do we receive, give, and discover together a diversity which hopefully enriches all who participate? My colleagues, doctoral candidate Anna Neumann and Leendert-Jan Parlevliet, and myself propose *figure 1* below to look at liturgy as catechetical *locus* from three different angles (going clockwise),

a. (with)in

c. about b. from

a. Learning *(with)in* the diversity of a liturgy: At the beginning of each liturgy a new faith community gathers. Each time, participants form a new inclusive community in juxtaposition, whereby diversity is a given, but not thematized per se, as they work on a shared objective of learning, how to be "disciples of Christ". Every single individual is part of this diverse gathering, and all should benefit together when learning about the message the Church proclaims. Diversity is the framework in which participants receive instruction.
b. Learning *from* the diversity in a liturgy: Individual perspectives are included to get to know each other, whereby all parties, all sides, are counterparts as 'the other' to each other. The fact that the congregation is diverse is in itself an object of learning. The liturgy is, therefore, a safe space where diversity is allowed to exist, acknowledged and highlighted.
c. Learning *about* diversity during a liturgy: Information is imparted and passed on to provide and understand 'the other.' The 'other' is both the object of learning and the teacher on their own terms. This implies abandoning any presumptions the learner might have. Diversity itself becomes the object of the instruction, the topic. The sermon and the intercessions ('Prayers of the People') may be moments when this is explicitly brought to the forefront as these are by their very nature mostly contextual.

These three vantage points intersect, consecutively or in reverse, at various times, and/or overlap: one may be more prevalent than the other two, or only two may be present at a given time but not the third, etc. I propose *figure 2* to illustrate this interaction and oscillation,



This learning curve can take a congregation in surprising directions. Bolz-Weber who founded the welcoming and affirming congregation "House for All Sinners and Saints" in Denver (CO) in 2008, speaks about the time when more and more people joined who did not belong to the intended target-group of disenfranchised individuals, and the dilemma about inclusion it raised in her parish.

> "Then Asher spoke up. 'As the young transgender kid who was welcomed into this community, I just want to go on record and say that I'm really glad there are people at church now who look like my mom and dad. Because I have a relationship with them that I just can't with my own mom and dad.'" (Bolz-Weber 2013:186)

Because of its very diversity, the make-up of the congregation was shifting, and it was up to the first generation of parishioners, those shunned in other churches, whether or not the 'standard' congregant (privileged because of colour, sexual orientation, social position, etc.) could find their place among those first members.

Contextual theologies for contextual liturgies

A contextual liturgy for learning diversity ought to have contextual theologies to academically reflect on it. Claudia Jahnel writes that

> "Contextual theologies only exist in the plural. Contextual theologies are provocative because they cause unambiguities and clear demarcations to tumble and challenge us to bear ambivalences. Contemporary contextual theologies, I would argue, are increasingly transcultural and intersectional: […] These shifts reflect fundamental global and local changes. Traditional structures disintegrate and cultural identities are called into question, globalization processes continuously lead to social differentiations and hybridizations – wherever this happens, religious identities also become multiple identities, regional contexts are no longer homogenous – supposing they ever were – and cultural particularities have long been coloured by hybrid, transcultural, glocalizing interrelationships." (Jahnel 2023:44–45).

There are universal ideals and experiences that the churches can share during corporate worship. The wellbeing of liturgical participants does demand, however, that the verbalization and broader externalization of this universality needs to be adapted in order to be received by its audience: it needs to be universal and contextual, global and local (glocal). These new methods of Contextual, and even Liberation, Theology should ideally come from within marginalized groups, reclaiming their place within the community. 'Queer', in 'Queer Theology', a term first used academically in the early 1990s, "remains a concept, form of activism, and theorizing that continues to push and disrupt established boundaries and binaries" (Barber & Hidalgo 2023). "Activism" as well as "theorizing", word and deed.

Homophily principle

Tensions exist between uniformity vs. diversity, universality vs. contextuality and particularity. As I have noted, the diversity of the congregants can be decisive for the contextuality of the liturgy. Jan Hendriks describes the "ethnic identity" (I include a theological/ecclesiological identity) of organizations (I include faith-communities) as "the self-definition of a group in which the group expresses what it sees as its char-

acteristic and distinguishing feature vis-à-vis culture and society" (Hendriks 1990:-140[6]).

Circling back to King's quote about the "most segregated hour of Christian America". Here he describes a phenomenon known as the 'homophily principle', meaning that sameness creates a connectedness ('like-seeks-like'). It is a sociological term coined in the early 1950s which tries to clarify why people with a similar identities-profile will gravitate towards each other, often at the expense of others (cf. Hanff 2019). This differs from the premise of special ministries aimed at ethno/cultural-specific parishes or linguistic ministries which try to provide a service for a group with a definite need but not at the expense of other groups. Compare this to the congregation in our definition of catechesis where youth and senior ministries operate side by side: specific but not superior, particular but not exclusionary. While King is referring to his own struggles and that of his African American (church-)community during Segregation and the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s in the USA – the same cultural framework in which sociologists started applying the homophily principle – we can broaden this to all minority and marginalized voices in the churches, also in a 21st century Global North (Henry 2019).

As attitudes and values in many places of the world have become more progressive, we also witness rejection and even pushback, both from native conservatives as from newcomers with a (more) traditionalist background. Underlying reasons for immigrating, connecting to the country's socio-cultural framework, as well as personal experiences explain why some newcomers adapt more to local values while others reject these (Röder & Lubbers 2016:265). Studies published by the Pew Research Center show that there are many factors that play into the acceptance, or not, of LGBT+ persons, but in many cases religion still has a negative influence. The numbers are, nonetheless, hopeful (cf. Connaughton 2020; cf. Poushter & Kent 2020).

The more the homophily principle applies, the less diverse and the more homogenous the congregation (Henry 2019); it might help with (dedicated) contextual liturgy, but it mostly undermines its universality and inclusion. As Röder's and Lubbers' study shows, the standardized and normative values from a person's background do influence the acceptance or not of diversity.

Proposed catechetical methods

In this section, I would like to offer a few suggestions for reflection and discussion as well as methodologies for diversity catechesis in the liturgy in order to deepen the vantage points from *figures 1* and *2*. They can themselves connect into various combinations of implementation or exploration, they can potentially intersect. This list is certainly not exhaustive, and each individual congregation is framed by its financial means, human resources, accessibility of the building, location, demographics, etc.

[6] The original Dutch reads *…de zelf-definitie van een groep waarin de groep uitdrukt wat zij ziet als het haar kenmerkende en onderscheidene in deze kultuur en in deze samenleving* (transl. JJV).

Yet, diversity starts with inter-personal relationships, and creating a welcoming and affirming space need not necessarily be curtailed by material deficits. These can be small efforts, e.g. invitations and posters stating that the congregation is LGBT+ welcoming, participation of diverse identities in a liturgical role, more varied symbolism and imagery, inclusive language etc.

Didachè ('teaching') and *kerygma* ('proclaiming'); or professing, preaching, and singing: The Creed and sermon are recurring pedagogical rubrics in most liturgies that are especially universal but can also be interpreted contextually: the unifying, but also qualifying, function of the Creed; and the different functions of the sermon in the different denominations ('Law and Gospel' in Lutheranism). Does a creed always have to refer to God as 'Father', or could 'Parent' be an option (*Sancta Trinitas*, 'Holy Trinity', is grammatically feminine)? Could affirming the grammatically feminine or neuter gender of the Holy Spirit in Greek and Hebrew respectively (πνεῦμα, רוח) help to counter male-exclusive theology? Could we explore more consciously the options individual languages have to offer in widening the way we describe the divine (Barr 2017)?

Likewise, could the topic of diversity be broached thematically in the sermon, within the theological framework of the denomination? Could examples used in the sermon to illustrate the message be more diverse? In the same way, a congregation's hymnody can proclaim diversity by using inclusive language or imagery that speaks to parishioners from various backgrounds and with different identity-profiles. Modern hymnodists include topics and language in their compositions that are relevant to present-day parishioners, and that have even crossed denominational borders.

Oecumenica; or could ecumenical methodology be applied to diversity catechesis: One of the methodologies in ecumenical relations is 'unity in (reconciled) diversity', whereby what is shared is considered more important than what is different: diversity is not seen as a hindrance for unity, neither is it taken for granted, but it also serves as a catalyst for more unity. While much is left to be resolved, a conscious effort is made to express unity in word and deed. As Sr Lorelei Fuchs, a Roman Catholic theologian, writes,

> "[T]he unity sought is not achieved despite the diversity in Christianity but through the very diversity that is at the heart of Christian experience. At the same time, since the diversity serves the unity, the diversity is not without limits. Parameters set the limits of an acceptable diversity which safeguard unity." (Fuchs 2008:64)

Another step in ecumenical methodology is 'partial/full communion' whereby each partner in the ecumenical dialogue recognizes and acknowledges the other as being fully church, accepting their catholicity and apostolicity, mostly resulting in reciprocal pastoral and sacramental hospitality, sometimes even resulting in the interchangeability of clergy. Ecumenical partners recognizing each other as truly part of the Christian Church serves as an incentive for Christians to recognize 'the other' as fully Christian. Could such a reciprocal ecclesiology and sacramentology, frequently expressed through joint liturgies, offer an example for a 'reciprocal diversity', a 'diversity ecumenism'?

I also point to the Lutheran confessional *satis est*-principle, from the same article, CA VII, previously quoted, that "[f]or the true unity of the Church it is enough [*satis est*] to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" (CA VII §2). Where people gather around the Gospel of Christ and celebrate the Sacraments in unity, the exact order of service is of secondary importance as are – I would argue – the particularities of each individual.

Another possible ecumenical catechetical tool is 'receptive ecumenism' developed by Paul Murray, another Roman Catholic theologian, which starts the ecumenical dialogue by asking (I paraphrase), 'What can my church learn/receive from your church with integrity?' The question could then also be applied to the learning process during the liturgy, namely, 'What can our congregation learn/receive from you, and what can you learn/receive from our congregation?' Vicky Balabanski and Geraldine Hawkes write that it is about "a healthy recognition of one's own need for healing, through discerning from time to time any place within our structures, systems, practices and processes that may be oppressing, obscuring, diminishing or even extinguishing the light of Christ, or blocking people from being drawn closer into Christ and towards one another." (Balabanski & Hawkes 2018:vii-viii)

A *verstehende Prozess* or an understanding (empathizing) process of acknowledging 'the other': Hans-Georg Gadamer posits a *verstehende Prozess*, an 'understanding process'. Dialogue or communicating and working towards mutual understanding is to Gadamer the clearest model of the process of *verstehen*. To paraphrase him, opinions and positions are like the horizon, and when these opinions and positions change, the horizon does not vanish, it shifts (Leezenberg & de Vries 2017:209-212). In this empathizing process, whereby mutual understanding is crucial, participants are not required to abandon their horizon, their treasured beliefs and (liturgical) praxis, merely to shift them, to refocus them in relation to the horizon of the other participants, literally, 'broaden their horizon'. Horizons might in that case overlap or even merge, and liturgy also becomes a *verstehende Prozess*.

Luther's view on *vocatio* (*Beruf*, 'calling'): This is already intersectional, as it describes the various overlapping 'tasks' people are called to in life, e.g. parent and spouse and Christian. Could this be applied to other aspects of intersectional identities? For example, a criticism often heard is that a person cannot possibly be LGBT+ and Christian at the same time. Mary Lowe even points to the conviction that being LGBT+ is the worst sin of all because it is "a part of the autonomous essence of the person" and therefore "LGBTQI persons have been seen as sinful in their enduring nature in a way that straight 'sinners' have not" (Lowe 2010:122). In other words, guilty until proven innocent. Or, to put it in Lutheran theological terms of *simul justus et peccator* ('both saint and sinner'), many consider themselves less sinful and more saintly than their LGBT+ neighbour, just because they themselves happen to have been born heterosexual.

Yet, "many vocations or callings can be heard 'simply' by attending to one's relationships and commitments – to the people and places in one's life" (Mahn 2017:205). Those "people and places" tend to be diverse. This interconnects with the *missio Dei*, the mission of the Church as a whole, with all the denominations and all its members

of all backgrounds which is the mission of Christ, called to proclaim the Good News of God's love and grace, and act as God's co-workers in this world (cf. Jongeneel & van Engelen 1988:451).

Another element of the Church's and Churches' vocation is *oratio* or prayer, and this in tandem with the Creed, sermon and hymns (in the *Defence of the Augsburg Confession* (1531), Philip Melanchthon, Luther's brother-in-arms, even described prayer as a potential Sacrament, *Apologia* XIII §3). But do we actually pray for each other, for each particularity present? Do we pray for those we are uncomfortable with, or disagree with, or even dislike? In other words, do we pass on the grace offered to us? Samuel Torvend summarizes this calling, quoting Luther's *On the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ* (1519), as follows:

> "[T]he Christian is called to share that which he or she has already received: the grace and mercy of God. In other words, the theological claim – Christ's righteousness is offered freely and without condition – holds a social mandate: "As love and support are given you [by Christ in Holy Communion],[7] you in turn must render love and support to Christ in his needy ones. You must feel with sorrow all … the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, [and] pray." (Torvend 2017:61)

Does our justification actually lead to good works, or does it remain what German pastor, theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace', without any ensuing efforts from our side? Just like the homophily principle runs the high risk of making a congregation complacent in its routine and composition, cheap grace makes Christians complacent in their attitude towards the plight of the (diverse) neighbor. The intercessions, as such, are part of that diaconal work ("social mandate") of the congregation, and this type of *diakonia* can be done contextually during the worship service: prayer as a social commitment, activism even (cf. supra), and prayer acknowledging diversity as a commitment to diversity.

Closing remarks

An individual's layered identities intersect, and often a religious identity is part of this, just as much as their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, etc. Yet, human sexuality remains a taboo, even an anathema, in many churches. At the same time, nothing is more public than the liturgy of a congregation, it is a literal open invitation. In this public liturgy, a community has the opportunity, and even – one might argue – the calling and obligation, to welcome a person to participate in the whole of the *ordo* with their entire identities-profile: nothing is left outside the church-doors, nothing is ignored or obfuscated. While this may be challenging, I have suggested some techniques from other areas of church-life and academic disciplines 'to learn diversity' and expand the approach to inclusion by the congregants based on *figures 1* and *2*.

[7] Words in […] by Torvend.

Here, a local faith-community has the opportunity to proclaim and share its universal values, both doctrinal and more practical, as well as offer a space of participation for individuals with all their particularities, set in the community's own context, geographically as well as socio-culturally, perhaps even counter-culturally. The more diverse a congregation is, the more it represents a microcosm of the Church universal. And the more a congregation is aware ('woke') of the particular identities of its members, the more contextual, the more in touch with the present world and times it becomes. Contextuality is not automatically a guarantee for inclusivity, but it can be a major tool towards it. A liturgy that takes into consideration its surrounding wider context as well as the potential particularities of its partakers can broaden its diversity and welcome, and that can be a beneficial learning experience for all involved. The willingness to be instructed (with)in, from, and about diversity is a moment of self-reflection, and more general catechesis, that a congregation might consider to integrate in the public worship service. This requires an openness towards 'the other', commitment to possible (radical) change, but also courage, as affirming parishes become potential targets by detractors of diversity. Yet, diversity increases the well-being, comfort and feeling of acceptance of parishioners and others that come into contact with a church. This, I posit, is a barometer for the success of diversity, and together with Chupungco, I point again to the "values as hospitality, community spirit, and leadership" as the underlying drive for a congregation, rather than the fearful exclusion of anyone with an identities-profile which is not the standard.

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How to interpret ecclesial conflicts? Axel Honneth's 'Struggle for Recognition' and the relationship between parochial and non-parochial thinking in the Evangelic Church in Germany as an example

Birger Falcke

Abstract

Normally, conflicts are interpreted as conflicts of interests, at least in so-called western societies, i.e. as conflicts over who gets access to limited resources. In short: Who gets the money? The conflict between parochial and non-parochial thinking in the Evangelic Church in Germany (EKD) is usually interpreted in that way. This is, however, not inevitable. For example, the interpretation as a conflict for mutual recognition offers an alternative worth considering. The following text refers to the theory of recognition of the German social philosopher Axel Honneth and his concept of a 'struggle for recognition'. From this perspective, conflicts on limited resources are an expression of a deeper conflict for recognition. The decisive factor is that different interpretations lead to different ways of dealing with a conflict. Finally, the article outlines four thoughts and questions which (may) result from the perspective of recognition regarding the conflict between parochial and non-parochial thinking.

Keywords

Ecclesial conflicts, Axel Honneth, parochial and non-parochial Churches, mutual recognition

1. Introduction

Being church without conflict is not possible. Already a glimpse into the New Testament, for example Mk 9,33-37 or 1Cor 1,10-17, shows this. It is the task of the practical-theological theory of church to analyse and reflect such conflicts and thus to show options for action for church leaders.[1] One of the main current conflicts in the Evangelic Church in Germany (short: EKD)[2] has for decades been the conflict between parochial and non-parochial forms of church. It comes to light due to declin-

[1] Hermelink, J (2011): *Kirchliche Organisation und das Jenseits des Glaubens. Eine praktisch-theologische Theorie der evangelischen Kirche*, Gütersloh, 19–24.

[2] At present, there are 20 regional protestant main churches in Germany. Though they are combined in the Evangelic Church in Germany (German: Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD) they are independent and have different confessions: Lutheran, Reformed, or United.

ing membership, expected financial losses, and fewer pastors, but the roots and the history of this conflict are much older.

In the times of Charlemagne (†814), the parochial system became more and more the main principle of the church's structure.[3] This means that every centimetre of the soil and everyone living on it was assigned to one specific local church. In this way, the religious supply of the entire population could be ensured and at the same time their religious control, for example if people were following their obligation to attend mass. Complete parochiality meant that there was no choice of congregation but allocation based on the place of residence. Until the 13th century, the parochial system was broadly implemented. The upcoming mendicant orders in the cities of the 12th and 13th century challenged this system. As is the case today, money was a main object of the rising conflict: People gathering around the orders did not pay surplice fees to the regular clergy anymore. In the Roman-Catholic church, this conflict was settled with the council of Trent in the 16th century in favour of the parochial system. On the protestant side, the importance of the parochial formed local church congregation was emphasized as well. During the 18th and 19th centuries, conflicts arose again within the protestant church, especially in the cities. Beside the parochial parishes, local congregations sprung up, in which people gathered around a popular preacher for example. That challenged the parochial system again. More examples of the 19th and 20th centuries could be added. The practical-theologian Uta Pohl-Patalong (Kiel, Germany) who did research on the conflict between parochiality and non-parochiality sums up:

> „Der historische Rückblick zeigt, dass der Konflikt immer dann ausbricht, wenn das nichtparochiale Prinzip erstarkt und zur Konkurrenz des parochialen Elements wird. In der Regel ist dies dann der Fall, wenn aufgrund gesellschaftlicher Veränderungen die jeweilige Gestalt von Parochialität einen Funktionsverlust erleidet und die veränderten religiösen und sozialen Bedürfnisse nicht mehr erfüllten kann."[4]

In recent decades, somewhat since after World War II in 1945, significant social changes – namely: secularization – can be discerned in Germany again, which have an enormous impact on the ecclesial situation. This is shown by the declining membership: In 1945 more than 90% of the German population were part of the Roman-Catholic or the protestant churches. Since 2022, less than 50% belonged to one of these main churches. 23% of the population, more than 19 million people, were a member of the EKD.[5] Before the Covid-19 pandemic, on average 3.2% of these at-

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[3] See here and for the following Pohl-Patalong, U (2003)*: Ortsgemeinde und übergemeindliche Arbeit im Konflikt. Eine Analyse der Argumentationen und ein alternatives Modell*, Göttingen, chapter 3.

[4] Pohl-Patalong: *Ortsgemeinde und übergemeindliche Arbeit im Konflikt*, 130.

[5] 25% were Roman-Catholic, 4% other Christian churches (Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, etc.), 5% other religions (especially Islam) and 43% without any confession or religion. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland: *Wie hältst du's mit der Kirche? Zur Bedeutung der Kirche in der Gesellschaft. Erste Ergebnisse der 6. Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung*, Leipzig 2023, 8f.

tended Sunday services on a regular basis.[6] Because of the German partition between 1949 and 1990 in a democratic western and a communist eastern state, the situation is very disparate: In some parts of eastern Germany, less than 15% of the people are members of any church, whereas in some western parts more than 65% of the population belong to a church. It is likely that in the 2040s the membership numbers of the protestant church will be halved compared to 2017.[7] Similar developments apply to the catholic church. This crisis of membership leads more and more to a crisis of finance and shows a crisis of relevance as well – not just of the churches, but of the Christian faith. Hence, the protestant church is under pressure.[8]

If there is anything true in what Pohl-Patalong states: The conflict between parochiality and non-parochiality erupts when the parochial system can no longer fulfil religious and social needs due to social changes, then it is just logical that the conflict got more intense in the last decades. It gets visible when it comes to economical questions: Who gets the money? Who gets the personnel? etc. Classical parish churches that are constructed parochial and non-parochial forms such as international churches, specific counselling offers, e.g. in a hospital, and newer, non-parochial church plants are struggling.

But: Is the conflict just about money, personnel etc.? What kind of conflict is it? It is necessary to ask these questions because conflicts are different in shape. This may sound banal but it is important because every conflict interpretation has its own specific consequences for dealing with it and for the possibility of solving it. The conflict discussed here serves as an example for this but, actually, this is important for all kinds of ecclesial conflicts.

2. Interpretation of conflicts

In her book *Ortsgemeinde und übergemeindliche Arbeit im Konflikt*, Pohl-Patalong interprets the relationship between parochiality and non-parochiality as a social conflict of interests and refers to different sociologists. In short: Conflict of interests means, according to Pohl-Patalong, that if the interests of one group are to be realized, the interests of other groups are affected and their chance of realization is diminished – that is why conflicts are inevitable. Conflicts can therefore be defined as antithetic relationships based on conflicting interests.[9] In a context of declining ecclesial finances and personnel, it is instantly plausible to assume that there are different interests in the distribution of these goods and hence the conflicts.

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6 Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland: Die Äußerungen des kirchlichen Lebens im Jahr 2019. Korrigierte Ausgabe August 2021, Hannover 2021, 19.

7 Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland: *Wie hältst du's mit der Kirche*?, 58.

8 This has led to reform debates and programs in the academic theology as well as within the church. To get an insight, see Hauschildt, E & Pohl-Patalong, U (2018[2]): *Kirche (Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie, vol. 4*), Gütersloh, 194–196 and 284.305.

9 Pohl-Patalong, U (2003): *Ortsgemeinde und übergemeindliche Arbeit im Konflikt*, 35–38.

But what if we interpret the conflict in a different way? Inspired by developments in the Church of England (Mixed Ecology of Church) and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (Mosaic of Church Places) regarding inherited and fresh expressions of church, I'm trying to understand the conflict between different forms of church as a conflict of recognition. The report Mission-Shaped Church (2004) asks "how can existing [church] plants become recognized 'adult' churches"?[10] The term recognize/recognition is often used in the following paragraph but not systematically reflected. In the reports of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands I could hardly find the word *erkenning*, but still the desire becomes clear again and again. And at least one paper from 2017 claims that there is a feeling of *"een gemis aan ruimte en erkenning"*[11] for mature pioneer places.[12]

But what does recognition mean? The term and concept is fundamental to the German social philosopher Axel Honneth.[13] His thoughts fit the present topic not only because of his basic insights into the importance of recognition in general, but also because he explicitly distinguishes his concept of a struggle for recognition from the interpretation of conflicts of interests. The latter he understands to be the interpretation that conflicts are traced back to diverging interests which "are supposed to emerge from the objective inequalities in the distribution of material opportunities without ever being linked, in any way, to the everyday web of moral feelings".[14] The objects of interest are therefore goods that are available only in limited quantities and whose distribution is therefore contested, ultimately to ensure one's own survival.[15] In this reading, conflict groups arise only for strategic reasons. In contrast to that Honneth's struggles for recognition are linked to moral expectations.

Honneth admits that conflicts *can* be motivated by diverging interests in limited goods but "social theory's fixation on the dimension of interests has […] thoroughly obscured our view of the societal significance"[16] of mutual recognition. As a result, there is a lack of awareness that, for example, in struggles of distribution, this struggle is not merely about the redistribution of limited resources, but against "distributional injustices […] as the institutional expression of social disrespect – or, better said, of

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[10] Church of England, Mission and Public Affairs Council: *Mission-shaped Church. Church planting and fresh expressions of Church in a changing context*, London 2004, 126.

[11] den Hoedt, Peter: *Passende organisatiestructuur. Verdieping bij de publicatie 'Op hoop van zegen' rond pionieren*, s.l. 2017, 2.

[12] This led to considerations regarding 'kerngemeenten'. See Protestantse Kerk in Nederland: Mozaïek van kerkplekken. Over verbinding tussen bestaande en nieuwe vormen van kerk-zijn, Utrecht 2019, 3.

[13] Basically, see Honneth, A (1995): *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge (German version 1994, [10]2018: Kampf um Anerkennung).

[14] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 161.

[15] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 165. In this article it is neither necessary nor possible to analyze the relation of Pohl-Patalong's and Honneth's understanding of conflicts of interests in detail. It must suffice that the basic considerations are similar.

[16] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 166.

unjustified relations of recognition".[17] This means, what initially appears to be a pure conflict of interests turns mostly out to be the visible expression of deeper moral reasons. Consequently, conflict research must be supplemented and corrected according to recognition theory.

In all of this, it is important to consider that Honneth's thoughts are related to relationships between human beings. They are originally not related to church. It is another step to transfer them to the relationship between and the conflict of parochial and non-parochial thinking. In this conflict, human beings are involved. *They* are the actual competitors. Structures or ways to think themselves cannot compete.

So, before trying to transfer Honneth's thoughts, it is necessary to understand them at first. The emphasis of the following lies on the latter: I will present Honneth's basic understanding of recognition and afterwards his thoughts regarding the importance of the disrespect of recognition expectations which can lead to struggles for recognition. Finally, I will sketch out some possible transfers, conclusions, and upcoming questions regarding the conflict between parochial and non-parochial thinking.

2.1. Axel Honneth's understanding of recognition[18]

In everyday usage, the German word *Anerkennung* is used in the sense of praise or respect or showing that someone has legitimate claims. Honneth's theory offers a more differentiated and deeper understanding of recognition: The experience of intersubjective recognition represents the condition of the possibility of a positive relation-to-self of the individual. At the same time, it constitutes the basic structure of every society, because if recognition is constitutive for the positive relation-to-self of an individual, then this individual must recognize the other person at least as such an individual from whom it can receive or even expect recognition. The recognition of the other person thus represents the condition of one's own being recognized. Individuality and collectiveness are closely related. In so doing, Honneth follows a philosophical tradition that assumes that the social is not secondary but constitutive for the individual. As a result, a society can be regarded as humane if it enables all its members to experience recognition in its various facets and thus to achieve a positive relation-to-self. Public struggles for recognition serve to enforce this.

According to Honneth, three types of intersubjective recognition have developed in modern societies: love, rights and social esteem.

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[17] Honneth, Axel: Redistribution as Recognition. A Response to Nancy Fraser, in: Fraser, N / Honneth, A (2003): *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, London / New York, 110–197, 114.

[18] Honneths thoughts are mainly based on the German philosophical tradition. In one of his latest books he deals with different meanings of recognition in the French, British and German philosophical tradition: Honneth, A (2021): *Recognition. A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*, Cambridge.

2.1.1. Love[19]

This mode of recognition takes place in all primary relationships with strong feelings such as friendships or family. What is being recognized in these relationships are the basic needs of individual life and the emotionality of a subject. This is taken into account by mutual affection. In this way, this first form of recognition helps to practice reciprocity in general (beginning with childhood), i.e. on the one hand to get to know the expectations of others and, on the other hand, to find out what expectations oneself may have of others or rather what expectations are socially considered as legitimate. Hence, primary relationships have an important emotional and socializing function for people but since, according to Honneth, love has no importance for public struggles for recognition, it will not be discussed further here.[20]

2.1.2. Rights[21]

While love always remains particular because it takes place between people who know each other, this is not the case for rights. People of the same society have a legal relationship with one another and mutually grant each other rights mainly without even knowing each other. So, love and rights are fundamentally different and yet, according to Honneth, both are based on intersubjective recognition. To explain this intersubjectivity of rights, he uses the figure of the "generalized other":[22] The generalized other means an imaginary other person that is formed by an imaginary combination of the many known people with their normative expectations. Thus, in the generalized other the ruling norms culminate, so that the subject knows what is socially expected of him or her. If a subject then looks from the "perspective of the 'generalized other'"[23] back to itself, it will understand that also itself can expect things from others. So, there is a reciprocal relationship between the subject and the generalized other. Through this, the subject experiences itself recognized as a person with rights, a legal person, such as all others are recognized by it as persons with rights, legal persons.

According to Honneth and in contrast to love, the special character of this form of recognition developed historically. He shows this by distinguishing between traditional and post-traditional societies and the development from one to the other: Traditional societies consist of different estates which have different tasks for the community. Hand in hand with these different tasks go certain rights and obligations. The legal status of a person, in an estates society, is therefore linked to their state. The legal recognition a subject consequently experiences in such a society is thus "situated hi-

[19] For this paragraph see Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 95–107.

[20] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 162.

[21] For this paragraph see Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 107–121.

[22] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 108. Honneth uses the term "generalized other" after the US-American sociopsychologist George Herbert Mead, see Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 78f.

[23] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 108.

erarchically, in terms of the esteem that each individual enjoys as the bearer of a role"[24], i.e. as a member of his estate.

According to Honneth, however, this connection between the social esteem of an estate and the granting of rights no longer exists in post-traditional, modern society. In the history of European philosophy, the transition can be noticed in discussions in the 18th and 19th centuries around the concept of respect. Two different meanings emerged: A respect in the form of rights and a respect in the form of esteem. This is related to the enforcement of the general principle of equality. Consequently, the law should no longer know any gradations. Esteem, on the other hand, should take individual achievement into account according to its social significance and thus knows gradations.

This historical view is supplemented by analytical philosophy. For this, Honneth refers to the US-American Stephen Darwall. According to him, people are able to respect a person for the sake of being a person, even if they reject his or her actions, i.e. they do not esteem the other one. However, this presupposes that a being is interpretated as a person. Because all of this is a cognitive accomplishment, Honneth concludes for his own considerations that mutual recognition on the legal level is determined by cognitive processes. So, this mode of recognition is about the cognitive respect of a person as a person and the rights associated with being a person. Since this means that it first has always to be established the fact that a being is person, this form of recognition has an inherent potential for conflict.

Honneth then asks what the dimension of personality is, which subjects cognitively respect on one another with rights – parallel to the basic needs, which are recognized through love. For this, he explicates the specific precondition of law in a modern understanding: Law only becomes valid because all persons who are subject to it follow it of their own free will. Conversely, this means that a person must have "the capability to make reasonable, autonomous decisions regarding moral questions".[25] Because otherwise the individual could not follow the law of his own free will. Therefore, in terms of law and legal relationships, a being is or becomes a person because of his or her "moral accountability".[26] This is the dimension of personality which, according to Honneth, subjects cognitively respect on one another with rights.

In this context, basic individual rights are of crucial importance: civil liberties to defend against the state, political co-determination rights to participation in public decision-making, and social welfare rights to provide a minimum of economic backstop.[27] These rights secure the citizens in such a way that they can decide and act independently and based on reasonable, moral insight. Their development from the

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[24] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 111.

[25] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 114.

[26] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 115. For criticism of Honneth's understanding of the person see Ikäheimo, H (2014): *Anerkennung (Grundthemen Philosophie),* Berlin / Boston, 145–147.

[27] See also Honneth, A (2014): *Freedom's Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, Cambridge, 71-80, mainly 78-80.

18th to the 20th century can be understood as a period of gradual implementation of the principle of equality. This was achieved through social struggles – struggles for recognition based on "the demand for full-fledged membership in the political community",[28] secured by those basic rights.

Accordingly, the struggle for modern law has achieved two things: the status of an equal legal person has been granted to those human beings to whom it previously had been denied: women, black people, workers, etc. in contrast to white, wealthy, civil men. The recognized legal persons have been endowed with more and more rights in order to promote freedom and eliminate dependencies and constraints. In Honneth's view, this does not mean that these struggles are now over because full equality would have been achieved – struggles for recognition still continue –, but it does mean that social struggles for recognition have already improved society.

2.1.3. Social esteem[29]

In contrast to rights, social esteem is, as already indicated above, about the individual traits and abilities that distinguish subjects from one another. Since humans are, in accordance with Honneth's core beliefs, creatures that are made to cooperate, they value each other because of their different traits and abilities insofar as these are beneficial to the achievement of common goals. For this to be possible, a socially shared measure is needed, which can be used to evaluate the specific quality of such an individual's trait or ability. Honneth speaks of a common value- and goal-horizon. Because of the social (value) plurality a permanent conflict is, however, part of this form of recognition.

Once again, Honneth returns to the transition from an estate order to a post-traditional one and the separation of rights and esteem that came with it. In that traditional order, there was a culturally shared idea of estate honour, which was measured by specific, intended ways of life and the associated tasks for the society. So, honour did not depend on individual traits and abilities but on culturally typed status group. All this was based on a supposedly objective value- and goal-horizon shared by everyone. However, to the extent that "the post-conventional ideas of philosophy and political theory had gained […] cultural influence"[30] the binding power of this supposedly objective idea decreased. Thus, it was not only questionable what the generally shared value- and goal-horizon might be, but also who or what contributes to achieving it. As a result, values became more plural and the importance of the subject increased, the concept of honour receded and a concept of social esteem emerged. But still, to be able to assess the quality of individual traits and abilities and so to distribute social esteem, a new social value- and goal-horizon had necessarily to be formed.

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[28] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 116.

[29] For this paragraph see Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 121–130.

[30] Honneth: *The Struggle for Rec*ognition, 124.

"Of all the ethical values prevailing and competing for dominance in modern society, only one has been capable of leaving a truly lasting impression on our institutional order: freedom, i.e. the autonomy of the individual."[31] There is no accepted alternative to individual freedom in modern society. Therefore, every modern social theory has this at its core, implicitly or explicitly, just as all modern social movements – such as women's liberation, the labour movement, and the civil rights movement – fought or fight against experiences of bondage and for the freedom of the individual. Consequently, only what claims to stand for freedom can receive public legitimacy. Furthermore, with this central position individual freedom not only defines the horizon of social esteem but, according to Honneth, the entire structure of modern society is ultimately based on this collective value. Its order must serve individual autonomy, make it possible and secure it. This means, that actually all three dimensions of recognition are determined by this ideal and they all must support it.

Explicitly for the third dimension of recognition, this means that those achievements that contribute directly or indirectly to the promotion and safeguarding of individual freedom for all can expect to be valued. Still, it remains controversial and is therefore a reason for arguments how the freedom of the individual is specifically expressed and what protects and promotes it or hinders and restricts it. According to Honneth, this leads to public struggles of different social groups over whose achievements are to be regarded as (exceptionally) valuable. This means that there may be conflicting claims for recognition that relate to the same goal or value. The result is a permanent social conflict.

Since money has a high symbolic meaning for the degree of social esteem, the distribution of funds often plays a role in these conflicts.[32] Economic struggles are therefore struggles for esteem, and struggles for esteem are often at the same time economic struggles or at least carried out as such.

2.2. Disrespect and struggle for recognition

The possibility for struggle for recognition has already been indicated, as well as historical examples. According to Honneth, the motivation for such struggles comes

[31] Honneth: *Freedom's Right*, 16, see also 15–17. Honneth's understanding of freedom cannot be elaborated here. In detail see his book *Freedom's Right*, where he refers to the western history of ideas of freedom. In a nutshell: It would be insufficient to identify individual freedom just with the normative understanding of morality in the Kantian tradition which says that all subjects need to be respected as ends in themselves and autonomous persons. According to Honneth, this idea is in danger of being abstract and unconnected to a society because that is precisely what it wants, it wants to claim validity independently of any social reality (Honneth: *Freedom's Right*, 1f.). In contrast to that, Honneth's approach "is concerned not solely with the moral autonomy of human beings but also with the conditions for their self-realization in general". (Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 172) And these conditions are closely linked to the experience of comprehensive recognition.

[32] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 127.

from the experience of denied recognition, which he names as disrespect.[33] In the same way that there are three forms of recognition, there are three forms of disrespect. Its most elementary and at the same time deepest form, which according to Honneth is culturally independent, is abuse, physical torture and rape, as the opposite of love.

Since the other two forms of recognition are historically and thus culturally conditioned, the equivalent forms of disrespect are conditioned in the same way. The counterpart to rights here is disenfranchisement. This does not have to be total, but already concerns the denial of single legal claims, which the subject can legitimately expect to be fulfilled. According to Honneth, when society rejects such expectations, it implicitly questions that the specific person is morally accountable.

Finally, social esteem is called into question by the fact that a society devalues the meaning of one's lifestyle for social coexistence, i.e. for the common value- and goal-horizon. Subjects are thus deprived of the opportunity to experience the social value of their abilities and their actions. Honneth calls this form of disrespect denigration and insult.

But how do social struggles for recognition arise from these individual experiences of disrespect? Firstly, Honneth assumes that they tear "a psychological gap"[34] which should actually be filled by positive feelings based on experiences of recognition but is then captured by negative feelings such as shame or rage. It is these negative feelings that reveal that certain forms of recognition are being withheld from the individual. In this way, experiences of denied recognition whose fulfilment could actually be expected according to the society's standards "can become the motivational impetus for a [social] struggle for recognition".[35]

Wether this actually happens, however, depends to a large extent on the "subject's cultural-political environment",[36] in particular because it requires a social movement, a group of many that share specific experiences of disrespect and make fighting for it a common goal.[37] This needs several things: first, the awareness that the many individual experiences of disrespect are actually not just individual, but very similar to the experiences of others, second, a "shared semantics"[38] which is able to put this interpretation of a common experience of disrespect into words and thus to make it communicable, and third, an idea of a future society in which these experiences have been overcome and the granting of recognition has been expanded. If this succeeds, individual experiences of disrespect turn into a social struggle for recognition. What is *unimportant*, though, is the question if those affected are aware of their recognition impetus or if they justify their struggle with specific interests in limited goods.

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[33] For "disrespect" see Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 131–139.

[34] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 136.

[35] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 138.

[36] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 139.

[37] On struggles for recognition and their moral logic, see Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, chapter 8.

[38] Honneth: *The Struggle for Recognition*, 163.

All of this, however, does not call into question the ruling forms of recognition per se. Rather, reference is made to the generally acknowledged forms of recognition, for the sake of which the struggling group and its members are or want to be recognized.[39] So what is fought against is the current way of granting recognition, i.e. the *application* of the acknowledged forms of recognition, which is experienced as disrespect.

3. Some possible conclusions and questions

Rather than asking which interpretation of the conflict between parochial and non-parochial thinking is the right one, I think it makes more sense to consider what the perspective of recognition theory can contribute to the understanding and dealing with this conflict, as well as with other ecclesial conflicts. For that, four examples will be given. May they be discussed and supplemented with further possible conclusions and questions, because in the end, conflicts are not a matter of theory but of practice. That is where they must be fought out and dealt with.

Firstly, recognition theory aids to understand something that is repeatedly encountered in connection with the aforementioned conflict: Representatives of the parochial side complain that there is a "swan song" for the parochial parish, even though many things would work well there.[40] From the perspective of a conflict of interests this is surprising, as it is the parochial parish that is decisive in the protestant church, both financially and in terms of staff. Apparently, there is a feeling of disrespect that goes deeper than the distribution of resources. Interestingly, Pohl-Patalong also writes of an "inhaltliche[n] Grundkonflikt"[41], but in my opinion it remains questionable how this can be determined with the concept of interest.

Secondly, is there a similarity between a parochial shaped church order and an estate order? At any rate, the parochial structure has developed within an estate society and it cannot be denied that church structures are often influenced by the political context, at least where there is a close connection between the church and the authorities. The question is whether parochial parishes do form their own estate which is not accessible for non-parochial church forms. Non-parochial forms of church would then not have the opportunity to obtain the same rights and the same social esteem because in an estate order every estate has its own predetermined rights and esteem, combined with predetermined tasks. Working on the conflict between the two ways of thinking, this would mean that it is actually not possible to achieve a different distribution of limited goods as long as non-parochial congregations do not have the same rights as parochial parishes. Just with having the same rights it is possible to struggle *rightly* for anything.

Thirdly, what is the value- and goal-horizon of the 'society' church? Without being able to adequately describe or problematize the term here: the value- and goal-hori-

[39] Honneth: *Redistribution as Recognition*, 152f.

[40] Karle, I ([2]2011): *Kirche im Reformstress*, Gütersloh, 124–130.

[41] Pohl-Patalong: *Ortsgemeinde und übergemeindliche Arbeit im Konflikt*, 31, see also 30.

zon of the church is its mission, or, in other words, it is the communication of the Gospel.[42] These terms are so open that they need to be discussed in order to become concrete. Some may criticize this, but with Honneth it should be noted that there is no choice: A highest value or goal always needs to be negotiation regarding its appropriate understanding for concrete life and actions and its consequences for rights and especially social esteem. This will remain controversial. The same is true with the term "individual freedom" which forms the value- and goal-horizon of modern society. Nonetheless, regulations and criteria must be found that apply at least for a time. Hence, if the conflict between the two ways of thinking is examined from a recognition-theoretical perspective, it must be asked: What can be considered as an achievement of parochial as well as non-parochial forms regarding the church's mission in a plural society?

Fourthly, the conflict is not just about different forms but about people with (fundamentally) different experiences, cultures, lifestyles and therefore different expectations with regard to recognition. An example for this are so-called international congregations in Germany, which are non-parochial and normally bring together people with similar migration histories. Often, these people are members of their congregation and of the EKD as well, but the non-parochial congregations themselves are usually not legally recognized by the protestant church.

Hopefully, these four sketched thoughts and questions have shown that looking at church conflicts from the perspective of recognition theory can be helpful in order to better understand such conflicts and identify possible options for action. In any case, the theory of recognition can broaden the view – both for the depth of the conflict and for its breadth.

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Restoring dialogue within Chinese-speaking churches in the Hong Kong context through Nonviolent Communication

Syvonia Pang Shiu Man

Abstract

This study uses the approach of Nonviolent Communication to identify the communication barriers in Chinese-speaking churches and to provide suggestions to help churches rebuild trust and love in a humane way and establish sustainable dialogue in the future. Political instability has led to an increasing number of church divisions in Northeast Asian countries due to political disputes. The Chinese paternalistic communication style and pursuit of harmony at all costs are inappropriate ways to handle differences and enhance mutual understanding. This study attempts to use Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication as a means to restore dialogue within Chinese-speaking churches in Hong Kong,[1] *which was broken due to severe social conflicts after the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication is an effective communication method to rebuild broken relationships and help achieve peace in many conflict areas. Therefore, this study has important implications for Chinese-speaking churches in Hong Kong and other countries in their quest for healing and establishing sustainable dialogue.*

Keywords

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), Chinese-speaking churches, restoring dialogue, communication patterns, life-alienating communication, Church unity, reconciliation ministry, rebuilding love and trust, compassion and empathy, appreciation, humanity and healing, sustainable dialogue.

[1] According to the Church Renewal in Turbulent Times – Studies on Hong Kong Church 2019 released by the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement in July 2021, there were 1,041 Chinese-speaking churches in Hong Kong with ties to 69 denominations. The Chinese-speaking churches in Hong Kong refer to churches that mainly worship in Cantonese, including some churches that also offer services in Mandarin. Reference from: Church Renewal in Turbulent Times – Studies on Hong Kong Church 2019, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement, p.7. (Chinese only)

Introduction

The 2014 Umbrella Movement brought serious conflicts to the Hong Kong society, especially conflicts between the older and younger generations with different political views. As part of society, local churches naturally could not stay out of it and were also involved. The same factors that divide society also divide the Christian Church. During the social unrest in 2014, young people were more concerned about and actively involved in political issues than older people. At that time, older people were worried about the dangers of getting involved in political issues and the impact on the economy, so they would rather remain silent and avoid participation. The same thing has happened to local Chinese-speaking churches and their members. Young members complained about the indifference of church leaders to social affairs, while senior members were unhappy with the aggressiveness of young members and accused them of undermining the unity of the Church. Disputes between younger and older members grew over differing political views. Young church members left, moving from one church to another, which eventually led to a breakdown in communication between them and other church members. Moreover, the remaining members were traumatized and began to fear conflict even refusing to discuss the past. This resulted in a communication blackout that was difficult to heal. Many local Chinese-speaking churches are reluctant to discuss political and social issues in order to avoid controversy and are becoming groups that are isolated from society. Since unity is one of the core values of the Christian Church, internal conflicts in congregations make it difficult for Christians to respond to the needs of society. Furthermore, stopping the dialogue or remaining silent does nothing to achieve unity and overcome trauma. Therefore, it is important to resume dialogue to rebuild trust and share love within the local church in order to heal and rebuild broken relationships. What, then, makes it difficult for Chinese Christians to communicate about different political viewpoints? Is it just political differences or are there other reasons? What kind of communication or dialogue can resolve conflicts within a church and rebuild the severely damaged trust and to let love flow again? What could help both parties to overcome communication barriers, to grow together again, and to achieve Church unity? With these questions in mind, I would like to refer to Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*.

Marshall B. Rosenberg (1934–2015), the late founder and director of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC)[2], dedicated his life to building peace and training people around the world to become peacemakers. As a psychologist, he believed that it is part of human nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassion-

[2] The Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) was founded by Marshall Rosenberg in 1984. It provides teaching and training in nonviolent communication skills in more than 60 countries, especially in war-torn areas. See, Center for Nonviolent Communication, viewed 17 November 2023, https://www.cnvc.org/.

ate manner.[3] Based on this belief, he developed a specific communication approach that transforms the way people express themselves and hear others from aggression to respect and empathy. This communication process, which he calls "the language of compassion", trains people to carefully observe their own needs and the needs of others to help each other to give and receive from the heart.[4] The NVC process is simple and consists of four components: observations, feelings, needs, and requests. It helps create a conscious, compassionate communication process that changes our often unconscious but harmful communication patterns.[5] Rosenberg cites many examples of how NVC works well in everyday life and even in racial and religious conflicts. However, is it equally effective in dealing with conflicts within a church, since these conflicts are not only psychological but also spiritual and ideological? Furthermore, in addition to handling conflict, how can we encourage church members to continue dialogue so that we can effectively handle conflict when it occurs again? Therefore, we will also examine the applicability of NVC on the spiritual level and discuss possibilities of implementing it in Chinese-speaking congregations.

The first part of this article introduces the internal conflicts and communication issues within the Chinese-speaking churches in Hong Kong triggered by the 2014 Umbrella Movement. One local congregation's experience shall serve as a case study. The second part discusses the main concepts of NVC and attempts to identify specific communication barriers that exist in Chinese congregations. The third part will explore the Chinese concept of Church unity and "forget the past" as well as possible ways to use NVC to restore the interrupted dialogue in Chinese-speaking churches. In this section, the effectiveness of using NVC to rebuild trust and to share love to restore and maintain communication between people in tension and conflict will also be discussed. In addition, suggestions from the NVC are sought to establish a sustainable dialogue. The fourth section provides a conclusion.

1. Communication issues in Hong Kong churches triggered by social conflicts

1.1. A local congregation's experience of division caused by social conflicts

At the end of a church leadership meeting, a young deacon shocked everyone in saying: "They actually used tear gas!" It was Sunday evening, 28 September 2014, when the police used tear gas for the first time against peaceful demonstrators who demanded universal suffrage. The Umbrella Movement was officially launched, and from that day on everything changed rapidly in Hong Kong.

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3 Rosenberg, M (2015), *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Encinitas CA: PuddleDancer Press.

4 Rosenberg (2015), pp. 3–4.

5 Rosenberg (2015), pp. 6-8.

The church I served at that time was a Chinese-speaking church in Hong Kong with a Norwegian Lutheran background. The congregation was small at the time, with about 50 members, and had been located in Kowloon for more than 40 years. Even if we say it is a Lutheran church, it would be better to say it is more like the other local Chinese churches because the first and subsequent pastors were Chinese and did not strongly follow the Lutheran doctrine. This congregation had experienced a serious division ten years before the Umbrella Movement due to conflicts among its members. The cause of the previous conflict had been the fact that some church members supported the changes brought by a new evangelist to the church, while other members opposed it because they believed that the change was too rapid and would become a cause for excluding the old pastor. Half of the members, all of whom were young members at the time, left the church. Since then, the remaining members have become sensitive and resistant to dissent and often emphasize unity and harmony among members.

When the Umbrella Movement occurred, church members were once again deeply divided over whether Christians should participate in social movements. At that time, young members believed that the church should care about social justice and become a prophetic voice, while senior members supported the concept of church-state separation and believed that church members are peacemakers and should not participate in protests. Young members complained that church leaders were indifferent to the needs of society, while senior members disagreed and accused younger members of being too radical. The pastor at the time agreed that Christians should care about current affairs and against injustice, in his sermons he encouraged members to participate in "Occupy Central with Love and Peace".[6] This caused dissatisfaction among members who were worried and opposed their children to participate in political movements. As the protests turned violent with clashes between police and citizens becoming more frequent, society's view of the protests became polarized, as did the congregation. When the situation became serious, the pastor changed his attitude. He called on church members not to participate in the movement and not to appear at the site of the conflict. This, in turn, enraged the pro-protest members, frustrated younger members and confused counter-protesters. Members of different positions began to accuse each other of being wrong and of destroying the Church unity. Young members were frustrated by these controversies. They kept silent and gradually left the church. The Umbrella Movement eventually ended on 15 December 2014 with a violent dissolution of the protest by the police, but the disputes among church members had already led to long-lasting distrust, hatred and scars within the congregation. A year after the movement had ended, the church had lost a third of its

[6] "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" was a social movement promoted by Tai Yiu-ting, associate professor of law at the University of Hong Kong, Chen Kin-man, associate professor of sociology at the Chinese University, and Chu Yiu-ming, a Protestant pastor. The movement calls for non-violent civil disobedience by occupying and paralyzing Hong Kong's business districts. Later, when protesters used umbrellas to protect themselves from pepper spray, tear gas and batons, the movement became known as the "Umbrella Movement".

members, including almost all young members aged 20–35, and the pastor was forced to retire. After this severe conflict, talking about the past or any political or social issues became a taboo within the congregation. Some members, however, indicated that there is a wound that needs to be healed. Staying silent heals no one.

1.2. Communication issues in traditional Chinese communication patterns

According to the *Report on 2019 Hong Kong Church Survey*[7], the issues that 75.7% churches are most concerned about are the loss of young members (13–25 years old), followed by the shortage of mentors for young members (66.2%), and the faith quality of young Christians (64.1%).[8] In addition, church leaders believed that the top three reasons for losing youth members are study pressure (59.8%), insufficient pastoral support (57.2%), and the failure of the church to respond to the needs of young people (49.4%).[9] The "Religious Background and Expression of Faith online questionnaire" research report[10], however, found that the main reason why Christians aged 18–29 do not participate in church is because they are "disappointed with some practices of their churches" (43%). This was followed by "can't find a suitable church" (38%); others are "too busy" and "don't like the church culture" (both 36%).[11] Comparing the results of the two surveys, both have different views on the main reasons why young believers are leaving their churches. While churches assume that younger members are attending church less because of their busy lives, young members are actually frustrated with church practices and interactions. Apparently, the information church leaders received from young members turned out to be inaccurate, and

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7 Research Group on 2019 Hong Kong Church Survey (2020), Report on 2019 Hong Kong Church Survey, HK: Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement, pp. 42–43 (Chinese only). This survey uses March 2019 as the statistical period, the survey time is June. It only covers the survey of Chinese churches, while the survey of English-speaking churches was published separately. Since the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB movement) was brewing in March but had not officially started, this statistical result actually reflects the situation in churches between the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB movement.

8 Research Group on 2019 Hong Kong Church Survey (2020), p. 42. (Chinese only).

9 Research Group on 2019 Hong Kong Church Survey (2020), pp. 42–43 (Chinese only).

10 Bethel Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation (2019), 'Stay Church or Dechurch', Urban Transformation, vol. 17, pp. 1–3 (Chinese only) The research was conducted from October to December 2018 and reflects the state of faith of some Christians between the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB movement. Different from the Hong Kong church survey, this survey was conducted through an online questionnaire, and the target respondents were mainly ordinary believers, not church pastors or leaders.

11 'Bethel Ray Bakke Centre' released 'Stay Church or Dechurch' research report found that people who left the church 'are willing to return to church' (2019), The Gospel Herald, viewed 13 December 2023, (https://chinese.gospelherald.com/articles/27755/20190321/%E6%9F%8F%E7%A5%BA%E4%B8%AD%E5%BF%83-%E7%95%99%E5%A0%82%E6%9C%83-%E9%9B%A2%E5%A0%82%E6%9C%83-%E8%AA%BF%E6%9F%A5-%E9%9B%A2%E5%A0%82%E8%80%85%E6%AC%B2%E5%9B%9E%E6%95%99%E6%9C%83%E8%A6%AA%E8%80%B6%E7%A9%8C.htm). (Chinese only)

young members did not share their true feelings and thoughts with the leaders until the survey was conducted. So why do younger members feel frustrated and unwilling to engage with older members in church?

A survey into why Hong Kong Cantonese-speaking millennial Christians are turning to international churches rather than staying in local Chinese churches has revealed the dissatisfaction of young Christians with local churches.[12] The study found that millennial Christians believed that, "local churches prefer formal education and it is difficult to develop personal relationships with church leaders", "local churches tend to have a rigid structure and an emphasis on works over grace", "local churches are lacking in vision and are no longer relevant to millennial", and "international churches are seen as having more to offer, including approachable worship styles and a stronger sense of community".[13] Another qualitative study in the first half of 2019 [14] from the second phase survey uncovered the unspoken expectations of dechurched Christians. Dechurched Christians are hoping to see a church in which "members care about each other and can communicate and discuss openly", "members can walk together in spiritual life", "members can worship together in unity", "the bible teachings can be relevant to real life and social issues".[15] In these survey results, we can see the common communication issues in Chinese churches:

1. Difficulty in listening to and understanding different opinions,
2. Class-based or patriarchal communication patterns,
3. Discussions about beliefs that don't resonate with daily life.

These communication issues can also be found in our local church case. For instance, during the first phase of the conflict within the church, senior members argued with younger members over whether Christians should participate in protests, which was both a theological and political issue. The debate is a theological question about the concept of church-state separation and the hermeneutics of Paul's letters, but it is also a political issue under the pressure from the Chinese government. There is actually no definitive answer to this question but always room for discussion. However, there

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[12] Snelgrove, N C and Kar-Yan Hui, A (2021), 'Why Hong Kong millennial Christians switch from Chinese local churches to international churches: A qualitative study', Missiology: An International Review, vol.49, no. 4, pp. 332–347. The survey interviewed 30 local young Christians born between 1982 and 1996. They switched from Chinese-speaking churches to international churches (English-speaking churches) and regularly attending services. John Snelgrove was one of the founder pastors of the Vine Church. The Vine Church currently is one of the largest international churches in Hong Kong, with more than 2,000 members attending services regularly.

[13] Snelgrove (2021), p. 339.

[14] Bethel Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation (2019), 'The Preliminary Qualitative Research Result on "Dechurched Believers", Hopes for Love and Fellowship', Urban Transformation, issue 18, pp. 9–11, viewed 27 February 2024, (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ahRRNm3L14A-3PtD20ZSbG609s_VG0Xr/view). (Chinese only) The survey interviewed 17 dechurched believers aged 20-60, some of whom participated in the online questionnaire. Although the age range of the respondents was larger, their reasons for leaving their churches and their expectations of a church were similar, thus reflecting the voices of younger believers.

[15] Bethel Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation (2019), p. 11 (Chinese only).

was no discussion, only negation of the other party's ideas. The communication issue here is the attitude of church members toward dissents. The young members felt that they were not being heard and their contributions to the church were not being recognized. The same thing happened on the other side, when older members felt that younger members did not respect them and were not willing to listen and understand their concerns. In this way, communication ends and respect and appreciation are lost. Dialogue ends because no one is willing to listen and understand.

In the second phase of the conflict, parent members (also senior members) opposed their children (younger members) participating in the social movement. There is no doubt that parents or senior members were concerned and worried that their children and other young members would be harmed. What they expressed, however, was harsh and unsympathetic. This kind of interaction is common in Chinese society influenced by Confucianism, especially in local Chinese churches that view the church as a family. Tobias Brandner, assistant professor at Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), who studies local Chinese-speaking churches in China and Hong Kong, says that "The senior side has the responsibility to guide and to offer caring support for the junior; the latter should respond with respect, submission, and loyalty." [16]

Therefore, senior members believe that it is right to discipline younger members and prohibit them from doing dangerous things, and that younger members should obey. Unfortunately, patriarchal communication patterns make younger members feel uncomfortable and distrustful. As one interviewee in John Snelgrove's study put it:

> "The local churches, they always talk about love, but you can hardly see them demonstrate it and when you fail their expectation, they are very cold and harsh. You just leave the church. That's it. There is not much care, not much love." [17]

Conflict always involves an imbalance of power. When one side holds the power, the powerless side becomes voiceless. Under such circumstances, the voices of young members become weaker, causing frustration. Therefore, we see that the failure to show care and love makes communication difficult.

The third communication issue that young members are concerned about is that religious life is divorced from real life. This is the question of *what* is communicated rather than *how* it is communicated.

In addition to being frustrated with church leaders' indifference to social issues, young members did see the worst practices in communication between believers in the third stage of the conflict case. At that time, church members with different opinions used rude and harsh language to accuse each other of mistakes and undermine the unity of the Church. Since Church unity is the most important value that Chinese Christians pursue in group harmony, anyone who does not work hard to maintain

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[16] Brandner T, (2019), 'The Church as Family: Strengths and Dangers of the Family Paradigm of Christianity in Chinese Contexts', *Theology Today, vol. 76*, no. 3, p. 219.

[17] Snelgrove (2021), p. 341.

this unity will become a target of criticism. Obviously, anyone who expresses non-mainstream views in a church becomes an easy target. Regardless of whether this concept of "harmony" is equivalent to the unity of the Church, judging without listening and understanding is not what the Christian faith advocates. Therefore, the inability to practice faith in daily communication is one of the communication issues that should be taken most seriously.

1.3. Is it possible to deal with communication issues within local congregations?

There is a Cantonese proverb: "It takes more than one day to freeze three feet of ice." This means that problems tend not to appear suddenly but rather after a long period of time. These communication issues within the Chinese churches are not simply caused by differences in political views but are formed by long-term patterns of interaction. The social event brought up hidden issues and traumas from the past and served as triggers for church divisions. Many factors cannot be controlled, such as changes in the political environment, communication patterns influenced by traditional culture, and even interactions between individuals within the congregation. However, Chinese churches often adopt the attitude of 'keeping silent' and 'forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead' (Phil 3:13) in order to deal with past conflicts and avoid future ones, does no good to the traumatized groups and may even make new conflicts more likely to ensue. I believe that, rather than burying the past and shutting down the dialogue, restoring the dialogue and renewing the communication pattern would be more beneficial to churches. The key is to rebuild trust and love to transform the inappropriate old pattern into a new communication pattern. The way to achieve this is to adopt a new way of communicating that strengthens our willingness to listen to different opinions, appreciate the contributions of others, and respect those who hold different opinions. In this way, restoring dialogue becomes a way to restore humanity and heal communities after severe conflict.

2. The Nonviolent Communication (NVC) by Marshall Rosenberg

2.1. The concept of NVC and communication barriers identified by Marshall Rosenberg

Psychologist Marshall Rosenberg believed that it is part of our human nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate way. The racial conflict that broke out in Michigan in 1943 made him think about two questions for most of his life: "What happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature, leading us to behave violently and exploitatively?"[18] And "what allows some people to stay connected to their

[18] Rosenberg (2015), p. 1.

compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances"?[19] With these two questions in mind, he developed a specific approach for people to communicate with compassion in speaking and listening. He called this approach Nonviolent Communication (NVC) referencing Gandhi's "nonviolence" and describing our natural state of compassion when violence subsides from our hearts.[20]

Rosenberg found that violence is ubiquitous in language and cultural systems. Even if people do not intend to be violent, their words and actions can cause harm and pain to others and themselves. He identified four specific forms of language and communication that lead us to behave violently: moral judgments, comparisons, denials of responsibility, and explicit or implicit demands. These forms of communication that alienate us from our natural state of compassion he calls "life-alienating communication".[21]

The first form of life-alienating communication is moralistic judgments. It is important to note that moralistic judgments should not be confused with value judgments. Value judgments are our beliefs about a good life, while moralistic judgments are our judgments about people and behaviors that do not conform to our value judgments. When we make moralistic judgments towards others, we focus on their "wrongness". We believe that they deserve punishment because they appear to us to be "bad". This kind of thinking and labeling can easily lead people to rationalize various forms of "violence" against others. Rosenberg states:

> "(It) is a kind of thinking that attributes the cause of conflict to wrongness in one's adversaries, and a corresponding inability to think of oneself or others in terms of vulnerability – that is, what one might be feeling, fearing, yearning for, missing, etc."[22]

Comparison is the second form of life-alienating communication, which is also a kind of judgment. Rosenberg quoted Dan Greenberg on the negative power of comparative thinking. For instance, comparing physical beauty or life achievements can be really discouraging.[23] Therefore, people who compare themselves to others, or compare people to others, make their own lives and those of others miserable.

The third form is the denial of personal responsibility. Rosenberg believes that our sense of personal responsibility is often obscured by our language.[24] When people explain the reasons for their actions as "having to", their empathy for others is hindered. Likewise, when people attribute their behavior to "you made me feel like...", they deny that they are personally responsible for their feelings and thoughts. This way of thinking and communicating can lead people to treat others and themselves harshly.

The final form of life-alienating communication that Rosenberg mentions is presenting our desires as demands and threatening others with blame and punishment

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[19] Rosenberg (2015), p. 1.
[20] Rosenberg (2015), p. 2.
[21] Rosenberg (2015), p. 15.
[22] Rosenberg (2015), p. 18.
[23] Rosenberg (2015), p. 18–19.
[24] Rosenberg (2015), p. 19.

if they fail to comply.[25] These demands can be explicit or implicit, but both can be unsettling for listeners, especially when they are exposed to people with authority, e.g. parents, teachers, bosses. People may comply because they feel threatened. The result is a decrease in their compassion and willingness to communicate.

Rosenberg believed that these life-alienating forms of communication were rooted in humanity's inherent evil and deficiency. Education was therefore needed to control the inherent unfavourable human nature.[26] Such education makes us question whether our inner feelings and needs are wrong rather than realizing them. Rosenberg also mentions that life-alienating communication has deep philosophical and political roots originating from and supported by hierarchical or dominant societies.[27] Therefore, people are trained to accept the values of the authorities and label those who do not adhere to those values as "wrong" or "bad". As a result, we are encouraged to unconsciously use the language of labels, comparisons, demands, and judgments about ourselves and others without careful thought. Rosenberg calls this type of language a "tragic expression"[28]. It seems to be the only way people can express their values and needs is by judging others, thereby causing harm to themselves and others and damaging relationships.

Designed to connect people in compassionate ways, NVC is an approach built on language and communication skills that leads us to reframe how we express ourselves and listen to others. It trains us to carefully observe our own needs and feelings and those of others, and to respond to them with respect and empathy.[29] There are four components and two parts of NVC for establishing a compassionate communication process:[30]

1. Observation: Observing without judgment or evaluation whether the words and actions of others enrich or do not enrich our lives,
2. Feelings: Describing how we felt when we observed these words or actions,
3. Needs: Discovering our deeper needs related to the feelings we identified,
4. Requests: Uncovering what we want from others to enrich our lives or make our lives better.

The two parts of NVC are:

1. Express honestly and clearly through the four components of NVC,
2. Receiving empathically through the four components of NVC.

The four components help us to discover exactly what we feel and need and encourage us to express them honestly. Likewise, we use these four components to perceive other people's observations, feelings, needs, and discover what we can do to enrich their lives. Rosenberg believed that when we communicate with the help of these

[25] Rosenberg (2015), p. 22.
[26] Rosenberg (2015), p. 23.
[27] Rosenberg (2015), p. 23.
[28] Rosenberg (2015), p. 16.
[29] Rosenberg (2015), pp. 3–4.
[30] Rosenberg (2015), pp. 6-7.

components and avoid communication that alienates life, our compassion flows naturally and there is no longer any violence within us.

2.2. Identify communication barriers that prevent restoration of dialogue through NVC

In point 1.2, we discovered the hidden communication issues in the traditional communication pattern of Chinese-speaking churches. These issues can easily interrupt the dialogue and damage relationships among local church members. However, if conflict is unavoidable, resuming or continuing the dialogue becomes very important for relationships. This is true, but there is another factor that makes the conversation difficult to restore. That is the negative language directed toward others.

According to Rosenberg's life-alienating communication of NVC introduced in 2.1, there are four forms of language that hinder our natural compassion and behave violently toward each other and ourselves: moralistic judgments, making comparisons, denying responsibility, and making explicit or implicit demands in communication. Looking back at the case of our local congregation, we can see that these four forms of language appeared at different stages of the conflict. And every time they appeared, the conflict moved to the next and more serious stage. Therefore, discovering and being aware of these forms of language in communication is very important to avoid ongoing conflicts or to resume interrupted dialogue. Moralistic judgments are criticisms based on personal values rather than on facts. As Rosenberg puts it, "We make moralistic judgments of people and behaviors that fail to support our value judgments."[31] At the beginning of the conflict, when young believers complained that church leaders were indifferent to social issues and senior believers accused young believers of not adhering to the church-state separation and being too radical, they were both using moralistic judgments against others. This explains why when the congregation faced different opinions, there was no room for discussion. When one makes a moralistic judgment, the others must be "wrong", so there is no need to discuss the topic further. This situation occurred again in the final stages of the conflict, with members accusing each other of undermining the unity of the Church. We see how using the power of moral judgment can ultimately lead to a complete breakdown in communication. Therefore, this kind of unexamined moralistic judgment is a serious communication barrier that cannot be ignored.

Another form of judgment is comparison, which is also alienating and extremely destructive. Comparisons are easily found in everyday conversations in Chinese culture, especially when parents talk to their children. Chinese parents often compare their children with themselves or with other children's achievements. This can also be found in the second phase of conflict in the case study. When young members were discouraged from participating in social movements, they often heard, "We've done it before, so we know the dangers, but you're so ignorant" or "Young people in other

[31] Rosenberg (2015), p. 17.

churches don't do this, why are you doing this"? The comparisons that exist within patriarchal communication patterns are discouraging and make others miserable. While senior members care and try to protect younger members from participating in "dangerous" social movements, their language does not convey love and hope. This connects to the fourth form of life-alienating communication, which is making explicit or implicit requests in conversation.

Chinese culture is an implicit culture, usually expressing needs in an indirect way without stating them directly. The way that senior members talked to younger members provides an example. Senior members refrain from saying "no" directly because the objection from young members is expected. So they say "no" indirectly, using blame and threats to get them to obey automatically. Rosenberg states that "A demand explicitly or implicitly threatens listeners with blame or punishment if they fail to comply ... especially among those who hold positions of authority."[32]

The cost of using this language is that it fails to live up to expectations and triggers defensiveness and resistance from the audience. Therefore, without recognizing and avoiding these communication barriers, it is impossible for the dialogue to continue.

Returning to the third form of life-alienating communication, the denial of responsibility has more negative effects on group interactions. The danger with this form of language is that it obscures a sense of personal responsibility, which implies a lack of choice. For instance, when young members decide to leave the church, they say: "We have to leave because they (the church leaders) have not repented" or "my friends are leaving, so I am leaving". The meaning behind these sentences is "it's not my fault" or "I was forced to do this" shifting the responsibility to the others. This form of language can stir up anger and feelings of rejection for both the speaker and the listener. While the former sees oneself as a victim, the latter feels wronged. Restoring dialogue is about rebuilding relationships. Anger at the other and feelings of being excluded do not help in rebuilding relationships but only hinder the dialogue.

2.3. Using NVC as a means to transform traditional communication pattern

We have found that there are three main communication issues in the traditional Chinese communication pattern, which easily lead the dialogue being interrupted. Then we have also seen the four communication barriers hidden in everyday language that can damage relationships and make it difficult to restore the broken dialogue. The two reinforce each other, making poor communication inevitable and making it very difficult to reestablish healthy dialogue. So, is it possible to restore the dialogue and rebuild the relationship through NVC? How does it carry out the restoration work under such difficult circumstances? Rosenberg suggests that "NVC heightens our awareness of the cultural conditioning influencing us at any given moment. And drawing this conditioning into the light of consciousness is a key step in breaking its hold on us."[33]

[32] Rosenberg (2015), p. 22.
[33] Rosenberg (2015), p. 196.

NVC is a communication skill that helps us become more aware of our own and others' inner needs and feelings. Its core theory is to enhance the user's ability to recognize their own needs and feelings and to be more sensitive in giving or accepting empathy from others. Therefore, when both parties are able to express and accept true thoughts or emotions honestly and clearly, empathy will be reflected in the communication. This slowly changes our language from violent to non-violent, from relationship-destroying to relationship-building. Change starts with oneself, rather than using NVC to change others or change a communication pattern. The goal of NVC is to transform one's own "tragic communication" patterns and harsh language into new, empathetic communication patterns and language. In interactions, this empathetic communication can influence others and make them willing to communicate in this way. This helps to build or rebuild love and trust in relationships and may change the communication patterns of a group. Therefore, the empathetic communication advocated by Rosenberg's NVC is not mandatory but a belief that empathy will be stimulated in interaction.

3. Restoring dialogue within Chinese-speaking churches through NVC

While NVC is a powerful communication skill that can help improve poor communication patterns and negative language, it also has its limitations. Leaving aside the application issues, there are two difficulties in promoting NVC in wounded church groups: the concept of eliminating differences to maintain unity, and the concept of ceasing to talk about the past to prevent disputes. These two concepts greatly weaken the willingness of church members to use NVC. The former makes NVC lose its importance, while the latter makes it lose its role. Since the NVC approach is about acknowledging differences, people are encouraged to accept differences through listening and understanding. Therefore, eliminating and ignoring differences makes NVC lose its value in improving communication. Likewise, NVC enables people to express inner needs and feelings, including past pain, in order to receive and convey empathy.[34] Thus, if talking about past pain is prohibited, NVC loses its role in healing the group. Since NVC cannot deal with these two concepts, we need to clarify these concepts from a Christian perspective as they are actually vague and inappropriate.

3.1. Achieving Church unity through humanity without eliminating differences

Unity is the essence of the Christian Church, and the Chinese-speaking churches attach great importance to this concept. In line with the Chinese culture's pursuit of harmony, unity has become the supreme value of the Chinese-speaking churches. The concept of harmony originates from the "Datong" (often translated as "Great Unity" or "Great Harmony") proposed by Confucian scholars and is deeply rooted in Confucianism and Chinese culture. It introduced a beautiful vision of "perfect shar-

[34] Rosenberg (2015), p. 103.

ing and great communal togetherness".[35] Chinese churches often confuse this cultural understanding of unity or harmony with a theological understanding of unity. Chinese do not welcome differences because differences may damage the unity of the group. As a result, churches often maintain harmony by eliminating differences of opinion and suppressing conflicts. This will not solve the conflict but only make the problem worse.

Conflict is often caused by differences, but differences do not necessarily create conflict. M. Painter-Morland, who teaches sustainability leadership, believes that conflict does not necessarily lead to church divisions. She argues that conflict can also be a valuable resource for renewal and realignment within the church when members realize that their individuality has something to offer to others: "Unity does not have to suppress difference or dissent. In fact, differences enrich the discourse within churches and keep its confessions alive."[36]

Differences, therefore, can be a cause of conflict or the key to enriching relationships depending on how group members perceive them. Conflict cannot destroy the unity of the Church, improper response is the main cause of church divisions.

Facing conflict can be scary or frustrating because there is no guarantee of successful resolution. Avoiding, ignoring, or forcing conflict to stop, however, are not good practices for Christians to deal with conflict and maintain unity. When Pope Francis spoke of unity and conflict in his *Evangelii Gaudium*, he believed Christians could have better ways of handling conflict: "Conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced. ... It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process. "Blessed are the peacemakers!" (Mt 5:9)."[37]

Christians have the ability to build communion in the midst of disagreements. This is because the Gospel of peace and the Spirit will guide us to look beyond the surface of conflict and see others with the deepest dignity.[38] From a theological perspective, conflict is not destructive but sometimes contributes to the unity of the Church. Jacobus Kok, associate professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria, uses Paul's teachings to the Corinthian church to prove that reconcilia-

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[35] Brandner (2019), p. 220. Tobias Brandner argues that the understanding of the church as a family among Chinese-speaking churches may hinder ecumenical church relations. When he explained the ecumenical vision of Confucianism, he referred to the concept of "Datong" which literally means "Great Harmony". This concept has been developed since the Han Dynasty (approximately 2,000 years ago) and remains central to Chinese culture today. Within the concept of the church as a family, however, the Christian unity understood by the Chinese-speaking churches puts love for the family first, and this love is limited to its own congregation.

[36] Painter-Morland, M (2001), 'Dealing with difference and dissensus within the church as organization', *Verbum et Ecclesia, vol.22*, no. 1, p. 129.

[37] Pope Francis (2013), 'Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World', Vatican Press, no. 226-227, pp. 172–173, viewed 20 February 2024, (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

[38] Pope Francis (2013), pp. 173–174.

tion and unity are God's will and that Church unity can be achieved in love stating "It is only in regard for others and self-sacrificial acts of love that conflict can be transcended and restorative unity be attained." [39]

In this sense, Church unity is neither unattainable nor impractical when we focus on building relationships with one another rather than just solving problems.

These theological concepts are consistent with the objective and approaches of rebuilding broken relationships in Rosenberg's NVC that we have examined under point 2.2. Rosenberg acknowledges that spirituality is at the base of NVC. He calls the beauty and powerful energy that are alive in human life the "Beloved Divine Energy" and believes it is this what connects people: "It helps to remember that a key purpose of Nonviolent Communication is to connect with other people – and thus with Divine Energy – in a way that enables compassionate giving to take place." [40]

Rosenberg is convinced that compassion and the joy of giving from the heart make up the beauty and power of human life and create connections between different people. Joy and love can make connections between people stronger as we discover that giving and sharing enriches the lives of others and ourselves. Likewise, understanding and acceptance can resolve all conflicts when we are willing to listen to the other person and speak empathetic words. As Rosenberg states at the beginning of his book: "NVC is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions. … The intent is to remind us about what we already know – about how we humans were meant to relate to one another – and to assist us in living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge."[41]

NVC is a tool that keeps us aware of our own humanity and helps us see the human dignity of others. This can be linked to God's creation. We have to respect the differences of others because not all human beings were created the same. The unity of the Church is therefore driven not by uniformity but by the ability to carry the diversity among its members.

3.2. Healing wounds by restoring dialogue rather than remaining silent

When I was doing research for this paper in 2024, ten years had passed since the Umbrella Movement in 2014. Amid the rapidly changing political situation in Hong Kong, churches are facing pressure from the immigration wave of believers and of the transformation of church structures. [42] Coupled with a flood of retirements of pas-

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[39] Kok, J (2012), 'A Theology of Reconciliation in Contexts of Conflict and Change', Churchman, vol.126, no. 3, p. 239.

[40] Rosenberg, M (2005), *Practical Spirituality: The Spiritual Basis of Nonviolent Communication*, Encinitas CA: Puddle Dancer Press, p. 7.

[41] Rosenberg (2015), p. 3.

[42] Alliance Bible Seminary (2023), '"Shaping the Future of the Churches in Hong Kong Conference" focus group survey report', Shaping the Future of the Churches in Hong Kong Conference, HK: Alliance Bible Seminary, pp. 8–11 (Chinese only).

tors, churches no longer have the energy to deal with the relationship trauma caused by past conflicts within the church. Some churches remain silent about past conflicts as if they never happened, some encourage believers to face the future by forgetting the past. Neither is a good response to conflict. Even if a conflict has passed, unhealed wounds can easily spark new conflicts. Rosenberg observes that people cannot move forward without resolving past pain stating "When people are upset, they often need empathy before they can hear what is being said to them."[43]

It is impossible for church members to realize the vision of church unity if the history of conflict is ignored and the wounds are not healed. Those who think that Church unity can only be achieved in the eschaton or that Church unity has already been achieved (because dissenters have disappeared) may have misunderstood what Church unity means. The late Knud Jørgensen (1942–2018) who has devoted his life to teaching missiology and practicing mission believes that the pursuit of visible unity in the Church is for the sake of mission: "Unity between the followers of Jesus is essential to the overall 'effectiveness' or, better, the 'credibility' of their witness." [44]

Since God's Good News brings reconciliation to the world, God has reconciled the believers to himself through Christ and has given the Church the ministry of reconciliation. What can churches testify to their neighbours if they are divided by discord and maintain a surface harmony by excluding dissent? Jørgensen refers to Bishop Leslie Newbigin (1909–1998) of the Church of South India who was dedicated to mission and unity in order to illustrate how the lack of Christian unity in the church damages its credibility in the world: "Unity and mission are therefore not just an ecclesiological issue, but a soteriological matter: 'The divisions of the Church are a public denial of the sufficiency of the atonement.' " [45]

Stanley Hauerwas believes that peace within a church and between the churches and others makes the kingdom of God visible. Since the Church is not the kingdom, but God's narrative is lived in the church, and God's people become evidence of God's presence, "The Church must be the clear manifestation of a people who have learned to be at peace with themselves, one another, the stranger, and of course, most of all, God." [46]

Following these theological notions, Church unity through reconciliation among church members and the reconciliation brought by the churches to their communities are not only a vision but the ministry of the churches.

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[43] Rosenberg (2015), pp. 170–171.

[44] Jørgensen, K (2014), 'A Credible Witness', in *Call to Unity: For the Sake of Mission*, Oxford: Regnum Books International, p. 288.

[45] Newbigin, L (1961), *Is Christ Divided? A Plea for Christian Unity in a Revolutionary Age*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961, p. 9, quoted in Jørgensen (2014), 'A Credible Witness',, p. 291.

[46] Hauerwas, S (1983), The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 97.

3.3. Restoring dialogue in love and trust through NVC

In the case of local church conflict in point 1.2, we have found that both parties had hoped to be heard and understood, and longed to be respected and appreciated. In order to meet these needs, there must be love and trust in the relationship. They are the two pillars of human relations, but they are also fragile in a complex contemporary world. Yet, despite their fragility, they remain the top priority when rebuilding broken relationships. John Paul Lederach who teaches and works in peacebuilding around the world believes that, "Peacebuilding is fundamentally rooted in the building of relationship and trust." [47] Furthermore, as important as building trust is, letting love be felt should not be neglected when rebuilding a broken relationship. Stanley Hauerwas points out in his book The Peaceable Kingdom that only love can eliminate the barriers between people: "For love is the nonviolent apprehension of the other as other. But to see the other as other is frightening, because to the extent others are other they challenge my way of being.[48]

Marshall Rosenberg would probably agree with this concept. When he explains love as the beauty of humanity and conceptualized this love as actions in NVC, he states: "To give a gift of one's self is a manifestation of love. It's a gift when you reveal yourself nakedly and honestly, at any given moment, for no other purpose than to reveal what's alive in you. Not to blame, criticize, or punish. … And the other way we give of ourselves is through how we receive another person's message. To receive it empathically, connecting with what's alive in them, making no judgment. … So Nonviolent Communication is just a manifestation of what I understand love to be."[49]

For Rosenberg, a relationship begins when one person discloses his or her needs and feelings and the other person accepts and responds with empathy. This is how love and trust flow in communications. Therefore, when communication breaks down, people can restart relationships by expressing their needs and feelings honestly and clearly so that others can once again be receptive and respond with empathy. He believes that when people become defensive, aggressive, passive, and frustrated during communication, it is because their needs and feelings are being ignored. Therefore, the idea of NVC is to get people's needs met: "The objective of NVC is not to change people and their behavior in order to get our way; it is to establish relationships based on honesty and empathy that will eventually fulfill everyone's needs."[50]

Moreover, awareness of our own needs and feelings, or those of others, reminds us of the fragility and beauty of human nature. On the one hand, we all need love and

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[47] Lederach, J P (1999), *Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace, p. 130. According to Lederach, peacebuilding is a process structure that involves redefining relationships, envisioning the way people work interdependently, and changing the way people construct and process relationships. And if there is a lack of trust in these processes, relationships will be difficult to transform.

[48] Hauerwas (1983), p. 91.

[49] Rosenberg (2005), pp. 5–6.

[50] Rosenberg (2015), p. 85.

empathy from others, on the other hand, we all can enrich the lives of others. Mutual understanding and acceptance therefore are the keys to rebuild broken relationships.

Looking at the case we have studied so far, church leaders acknowledged that they were failing to meet the needs of young members, but they did not ask or discuss those with them. Rather than sharing their needs and feelings with younger members, senior members expressed them with judgment and threats, which led to defensiveness and resentment. Likewise, younger members did not bring their needs to the church until the survey revealed their true thoughts. It is this kind of unhealthy communication and negative language that destroys relationships, not so much the conflict itself. With a willingness to accept differences and to recognizing that restoring dialogue is the church's mission of reconciliation (as discussed under point 3.1 and 3.2), however, every Christian can practice NVC in his or her congregation. For the unity and mission of the church, both church members who have left and those who remain can first use NVC to dialogue with themselves.

From an NVC perspective, conflict stems from unmet needs and feelings. In line with this, since people's needs and feelings are not being met, they are unable to give and receive empathy. Therefore, rebuilding the relationship is impossible, and conflict will continue. To break through this dilemma, NVC recommends that people can empathize with themselves by listening to their own needs and feelings. This is because "we need empathy to give empathy".[51] When people feel themselves becoming defensive or unable to empathize the others in a dialogue, they need to take a break and listen to themselves. By experiencing the four components of NVC with the same quality of presence and attention as one should give the others, people can listen carefully to themselves: Observe what is happening without judgment, state your feelings, identify the needs associated with the feelings, and express them honestly and clearly. Then, when a person regains the ability to give and receive empathy, he or she can accomplish the same with others, that is, to listen and understand the others' needs and feelings. This helps to dissipate hostility and increase willingness to restore dialogue. When people begin to listen to each other, forgiveness and friendship can heal wounds and allow love and trust to flow in the relationship again. As Rosenberg believed and experienced, "Time and again, people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with someone who can hear them empathically."[52]

As soon as communication transforms itself from cruelty to empathy, and as soon as the use of language changes from alienating life to enriching life, the possibility of restoring the dialog is significantly improved.

Here is an example that shows how NVC plays a role in an intimate relationship between a father and his son showing how communication in the Chinese-speaking churches can be re-established. The father learned to deal with his inner conflicts and connected with his rebellious teenage son through NVC. When his 15-year-old son took and drove a friend's car without permission and even lied to his father, the father

[51] Rosenberg (2015), pp. 103–104.

[52] Rosenberg (2015), p. 127.

was angry and scared by his son's behavior. But when he listened to his own inner feelings and needs, he found himself disappointed for not understanding his son and was worried that the situation would get out of control. He discovered that he needed to share his feelings with his son and discuss with him the consequences of his actions. The son at first refused to communicate because he did not believe that he would be listened to and not be punished. But the father realized his son's fears and his need to be understood, so he strove to empathize and stayed connected with his son. As a result, the son was willing to openly discuss the consequences of his actions and to apologize to the car owner, accompanied by his father.[53] In this case, the angry father used NVC to separate his moral judgment of his son's behaviors from his own feelings and needs in order to avoid speaking violently to his son. Additionally, he became more sensitive to his son's feelings and needs so that he could express empathy and love to his son and rebuild his son's trust in him.

This example shows how NVC can help people revive and continue the communication in stressful situations. Even if the other party has no desire to communicate, the dialogue may still be restored as long as one party is willing to continue communicating. This approach is more effective when initiated by someone in a position of authority, such as a parent, teacher, supervisor, or church leader.

3.4. Establishing a sustainable dialogue for a better future

Now that we have discussed the possibility and feasibility of restoring broken dialogue in local congregations through NVC, we also need to look for ways to sustain the restored dialogue. Rebuilding a relationship is not only about having a temporary conversation but about maintaining an ongoing and developing dialogue, which I like to call a "sustainable dialogue". It is characterized by sustained, enjoyable and refreshing conversations that enrich lives and strengthen relationships. Since the church accepts difference in unity, it is normal and inevitable that differences will cause disagreements. There is no guarantee that every member of a church is capable of handling conflict or adept at practicing NVC. It is therefore necessary for church communities to strengthen internal relationships and be prepared to mitigate the destructive power of conflict. Good communication patterns and positive language are essential, but we also need some motivation to keep the conversation regenerative. In the last chapter of his book, Rosenberg touches on a topic that is often overlooked but important in Chinese culture, namely: "Expressing appreciation in Nonviolent Communication." Appreciation may seem dispensable in communication, but it is actually the key to renewing relationships which can establish sustainable dialogue.

Referring to the case studies of communication between senior and younger members in a local congregation, one clear call that emerges is the need for mutual appreciation. Usually, in Chinese-speaking church settings, the voices of young members are ignored because the church is primarily led by senior members. When the social

[53] Rosenberg (2015), pp. 154–159.

movements occurred, young members expressed many opinions about the church hoping that the church would pay more attention to the needs of the whole society rather than just fulfilling internal needs. They were trying to contribute to the church, and what they needed was appreciation and affirmation from other church members. When their opinions were repeatedly rejected, they became discouraged about not being accepted and appreciated by the church. Finally, they withdrew from the church. Senior members rejected the younger members at this time because they wanted to ensure the safety of the church in order to avoid the situation becoming too dangerous. They tried to protect church members with all their might. What they wanted to gain were the understanding, respect and trust of younger members. So, when younger members argued with them, doubted their words or reacted rudely, they became offended and harsh because they also felt excluded and unappreciated. In this situation, both parties wanted to be heard, appreciated, and understood by the other party. These needs will remain as long as they are not met.

Appreciation expresses affirmation of a relationship, cherishing of the enrichment received, and a desire to continue the connection. This is even more important for individuals within a group, since it means increasing acceptance and recognition from the group, which benefits the group through their own contributions. This is what both senior and younger members desire and need. Therefore, expressions of gratitude without any other purpose, especially when people understand each other's contributions to the church, are beneficial to all members. As Rosenberg stated during a visit to his dying uncle: "Too often I had assumed that others knew the intensity of my appreciation for them, only to discover otherwise. And even when people were embarrassed, they still wanted to hear appreciation verbalized."[54]

Simply celebrating the contributions that others bring without asking for anything in return can be a blessing in relationships. When everyone's needs and feelings are met, peace and contentment prevail in the group and a sustainable dialogue is established.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we have discovered the communication issues existing in the traditional Chinese communication pattern and the communication barriers hidden in life-alienating language. These are obstacles that interrupt the original dialogue and hinder the restoration of the broken dialogue. Then, we found that there were some vague concepts among the Chinese churches, which reduced the willingness to restore dialogue. Since these concepts of Church unity and "forgetting the past" render NVC ineffective, they need to be clarified from a Christian perspective. For those communication issues and barriers that are deeply embedded in the Chinese culture and can easily lead to conflicts, the NVC approach does not deal with the conflicts directly but encourages people to face their own internal problems. From the perspective of NVC, conflict is often raised by unmet needs and ignored feelings. Therefore, before restoring dia-

[54] Rosenberg (2015), p. 216.

logue with others, people should first dialogue to themselves. Learning to listen and empathize with their own inner needs and feelings can help people listen and empathize with others. In addition to improving people's listening skills, NVC also improves people's skills in expressing their needs and feelings with the four components of NVC. Rosenberg believes that it is natural for people to give and receive in a compassionate manner. When someone expresses their needs and feelings honestly and clearly, others will gladly respond with empathy. In this way, church members can rebuild love and trust in mutual sharing and restore dialogue without reluctance or discomfort. While this may sound like a too optimistic approach to relationships, a simple and natural approach may be more effective for rebuilding ruined relationships.

Conflict within the church over differences of opinion is normal and need not necessarily be avoided. But the church would be wise to see it as an opportunity for renewal. If churches can help its members overcome the fear of an inability to communicate that arises from conflict by restoring and continuing dialogue, a deeper unity would be established. The key to restoring and sustaining dialogue is creating a safe and trusting space where church members can feel comfortable and openly share their needs and feelings. Therefore, NVC can be an effective tool to improve communication in Chinese-speaking churches. It can help local congregations to transform poor communication patterns into better, more fluid ones, and transform negative language into positive, contributing language.

For Chinese people who are accustomed to suppressing their emotions, learning to discover and express their needs and feelings is a form of healing. In addition to that, being aware of and avoiding life-alienating communication can protect everyone from harm. It is also about practicing faith in daily life. As the Bible teaches: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (Eph 4:29, translation: NIV)

It is true that NVC has its limitations, and it may not be able to restore every relationship. While NVC assumes that people are naturally willing to respond to needs and feelings with empathy, there are always exceptions. In this case, the role of a mediator who is well trained in NVC is important. This brings up the second issue: Who could be a mediator in rebuilding relationships among church members? In Chinese churches, usually the chief pastor of the church will serve as the mediator because he/she has the trust of the members. But what if the pastor him/herself is involved in the conflict? Furthermore, NVC is simply a communication skill designed to connect people, not a guaranteed strategy for resolving every conflict or uniting a certain congregation. The skill becomes ineffective if church leaders use it to get anyone to take any specific action. For instance, it is inappropriate to urge people to reconcile for the sake of Church unity through some conversations. While there are still many practical issues that deserve our attention, it is worthwhile to apply NVC in Chinese-speaking churches to restore dialogue and establish sustainable dialogue. To quote Rosenberg, "Anything that is worth doing is worth doing poorly!"[55]

[55] Rosenberg (2015), p. 216.

The Church is inevitably impacted by changing circumstances in the world. As part of society, local churches act as messengers of reconciliation, be at peace with others and reconcile with others. NVC is not the ultimate solution to all communication problems, nor is it the only way to restore conversation. Yet, the communication skills it provides are effective and can improve communication patterns and overcome communication barriers of Chinese-speaking churches. Therefore, I believe that local churches can benefit and contribute to mutual understanding by practicing NVC among their members, to restore broken dialogues and establish sustainable dialogue, and to demonstrate and share the message of reconciliation in the community

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"Kirchentag"[1] – An example of religious happenings as places for the formation of faith in a world full of diversity[2]

Harald Schroeter-Wittke

Abstract

The German Protestant Kirchentag is a unique place for the formation of faith. This religious happening has undergone various historical changes which are closely connected to the history of German as well as other religious developments. Chances and challenges of faith-formation in a diverse society can be reflected by evaluating the experiences and goals of the religious mass gathering taking place every two years.

Keywords

Kirchentag, religious happenings, formation of faith, diversity

1. Religious happenings as formative events

If we ask about places of faith formation, we need to develop a topography of religious education. Happenings, events, festivals, conventions, pilgrimages or Kirchentage are celebrations, exceptional situations in church as in everyday life.[3] They are heterotopies – places where the other, the unusual, the exceptional appears.[4] Such

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1 The literal translation of this expression would be "church day" or "church convention". The author decided to stay with the German title, in accordance with the official wording of the organization "German Protestant Kirchentag". Cf. https://www.kirchentag.de/en/, last accessed on 11/06/2024. Kirchentage is the German plural of Kirchentag.

2 Revised version of Schroeter-Wittke, H (2012), 'Kirchentags, Festivals, Conventions – Religious Happenings as Places for the Formation of Faith', in *Formation of Faith. Handing down Faith in European Protestantism,* ed. Friedrich M & Luibl, HJ, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, pp. 427–436.

3 Cf. Kunstmann, J (2005), 'Fest/Feiern/Event', in *Handbuch Religion und Populäre Kultur*, ed. Fechtner, K et al., Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, pp. 52–62.

4 Cf. Foucault, M (1990), 'Andere Räume', *in Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik,* ed. Barck, K et al., Leipzig: Reclam, p. 39: "There are also – and that no doubt in every culture, every civilization – real places, effective places which are written into the structure of the society, as it were counter-placements, counter-camps, actually realized utopias, in which the real places within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and over-

places are stages to represent what is strange to us and what keeps us alive. They are non-ordinary places which have their effect as such – even in everyday life. This effect is not based on the transfer of the unusual into the usual, the extraordinary into the ordinary, but only as the other it can have an impact on the everyday, even if this impact is hidden.

This holds especially true for processes of formation which are associated with such happenings. For on the one hand it is true to say: A feast is something different from everyday life. Therefore it also has nothing to do with education. At a feast, there is nothing to learn but everything to celebrate. Feasts are celebrated. They are "interruptions of life".[5] If the feast is made didactic, it is robbed of its essential character.

But on the other hand, the opposite is also true: at feasts, formation takes place. In the aftermath of the feast, in the echoes, resonances and reflections of the feast, formative processes are set in motion that draw on the resources of the feast.

This does not only happen afterwards but can also occur during the feast itself – if it is understood as a performance. For performance is a process in which (and insofar as) action occurs with moments of reflexion. Thus, a performance with its action can function as a formative process. This is a matter of the fundamental difference between doing and performing, as Marvin Carlson defines it:

> "The difference between doing and performing, according to this way of thinking, would seem to lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude – we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance."[6]

Thus, from a formative perspective, religious happenings are not meant to do religion, but to perform religion. The recognition of religion as performance – and thus the realization of the formative task of religion, especially of Christianity which is essentially "thinking religion"[7] – can arise from the process itself, but it can also be promoted by the structure of a happening. In this perspective, Kirchentage offer many possibilities which also correspond to the various dimensions of formation.

My analysis will be based on the German Protestant Kirchentag because it represents the largest event of its kind in Europe and because it combines in complex ways all that can be called the formative dimensions of religious happenings.[8]

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turned, so to say places outside all places although they can in fact be located. Because these places are quite *other* than all places which they reflect or of which they speak I call them the *heterotopias* in contrast to the utopias."

5 Cf. Rössler, D (1993), 'Unterbrechungen des Lebens. Zur Theorie des Festes bei Schleiermacher', in: *In der Schar derer, die da feiern. Feste als Gegenstand praktisch-theologischer Reflexion*, ed. Cornehl, P et al., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 33–40.

6 Carlson, M (1996), *Performance. A Critical Introduction*, London: Routledge, p. 5.

7 Ratschow, C (1963), „Das Christentum als denkende Religion", *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie*, vol. 5, pp. 16–33.

8 Cf. Bubmann, P (2008), 'Der Kirchentag als Bildungsangebot', in *Neues Gemeindepädagogisches Kompendium*, ed. Adam, G & Lachmann, R, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 413–424.

2. Enthusiasm and faith formation

> "Over l00.000 people participated and there were times where it seemed the whole city had become a stage for the church's activities and stunts and spectacles. It seemed like a foreshadowing of what is to come and also an echo of festivals in Biblical times where faith, feasting and foreshadowing the Kingdom played significant roles."[9]

This was the feedback from the Australian blogger Andrew Jones who travelled through the world in a truck and experienced the Dresden Kirchentag in 2011. His enthusiasm points to a formative event. So the question can no longer be whether religious happenings are a place of faith formation but only to what extent they are an event of faith formation. In Jones' words about Kirchentag, we hear echoes of four dimensions of formation that are particularly anchored in pop culture.

First, happenings are mass events. They are specific forms of community-building, which as regular institutions first became possible with the invention of railway in the 19th century and have spread since world-wide. The Protestant Kirchentag movement[10] in Germany and the Katholikentage[11] were initiated in the middle of the 19th century, both in the same month in 1848. They evolved into open demonstrations which, although intended to cultivate religion, always had an implicit (and later explicit) political effect.

Second, as mass gatherings, happenings are public events. Public events always have political effects, which is why, in in the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, they were always eyed with suspicion from the side of the state. This also applies to a lesser extent to the German Katholikentage in the 19th century under largely Protestant ruling governments.

Third, as public mass occurrences, religious happenings, events and Kirchentage are also phenomena of the pop culture whose beginnings can also be traced back to the mid-19th century[12] but which have received considerable further impetus from the new media and pop music in the 20th century.

Fourth, Kirchentage combine religious roots from the past with prophetic visions of life by claiming to speak to the times: faith, feasting and foreshadowing. In doing so, they span a dramatic arch that embraces the respective present in a curve from biblical times through contemporary questions to future challenges. One could describe Kirchentage as a contemporary way of shaping and experiencing the immediate expectation, the parousia.

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9 The quote constitutes a blog entry that is no longer available.

10 Cf. Kreft, W (1994), *Die Kirchentage von 18481872*, Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang; also Bormuth, D (2007), *Die Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentage in der Weimarer Republik*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.

11 Cf. Hürten, H (1998), *Spiegel der Kirche – Spiegel der Gesellschaft? Katholikentage im Wandel der Welt*, Paderborn: Schöningh; also *Zeitzeichen. 150 Jahre Deutsche Katholikentag 1848-1998*, ed. von Hehl, U & Kronenberg, F (1999), Paderborn: Schöningh.

12 Cf. *Handbuch Populäre Kultur*, ed. Hügel, H-O (2003), Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler.

3. Kirchentag after the second world war

Kirchentag as a place of faith formation has altered in the course of its history in ways which show parallels to the most important contemporary pedagogical streams. A brief sketch of its history since the World War II may therefore be helpful.[13]

The present-day Kirchentag was proclaimed a permanent institution in Hannover in 1949 by the later West German President Gustav Heinemann (1899–1976). Its founder and first president was the Pomeranian landowner and lawyer Reinold von Thadden-Trieglaff (1891–1976) who was also active in the ecumenical movement and a member in the church movement against Hitler.[14] Within the institution of Kirchentag, he installed the following goals:

- Kirchentag will strengthen and equip lay people on the frontier between church and world and so as bearers of mission.
- Kirchentag represents a place of meeting for all of German Protestantism and will offer experiences of world-wide ecumenism.
- Kirchentag will carry on the inheritance of the "Confessing Church" in the democratic and pluralistic society of the post-war period.
- Finally, Kirchentag understands itself as an instrument of church reform.

Between 1949 and 1961, Kirchentag was strongly influenced by the circumstances of a divided Germany. It presented itself to the world to which it was attempting to give hope and answers as a more or less united institution. Its Berlin motto "We are Still Brothers" (1951) expresses the feeling of belonging together which was also shown by the remarkable closing assembly in Leipzig in 1954 that united 650,000 participants. After the building of the Wall in 1961, Kirchentag lost its pan-German bracketing function. With the Dortmund motto "Living with Conflicts" (1963), the pluralist society of West Germany with its difficulties stood conspicuously in the centre of interest, Church reform was put on the agenda. The organizational style of Kirchentag changed: fewer lectures – more debates. Thus, it became a form of Protestantism that no longer stood apart from the world but instead had a share in its problems. Since Dusseldorf in 1973, numerically its low point with only 7,500 long-term participants,

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[13] On the history of the institution Kirchentag since 1945 cf. Schroeter, H (1993), *Kirchentag als vor-läufige Kirche. Der Kirchentag als eine besondere Gestalt des Christseins zwischen Kirche und Welt*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer; *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag.* Pearson, B (2007), *Faith and Democracy: Political Transformations at the German Protestant Kirchentag*, 1949–1969, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina (unpubl. dissertation). *Wurzeln und Anfänge*, ed. Ueberschär, E (2017), Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus; *Zeitansage. 40 Jahre Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag*, ed. Runge, R & Krause, C (1989), Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag; *Kirche in Bewegung. 50 Jahre Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag*, ed. Runge, R & Käßmann, M (1999): Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus; *Fest des Glaubens – Forum der Welt. 60 Jahre Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag*, ed. Runge, R & Ueberschär, E (2009), Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

[14] Cf. Schroeter-Wittke, H (2002), Thadden-Trieglaff, Reinold von (1891-1976), in: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 33, Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 168–172.

Kirchentag had massively changed, especially through its newly instituted options of participation with the "Market of Possibilities", the "Liturgical Night" and other communicative events in which so-called coworkers could present and communicate their life and faith.[15] Following Hamburg in 1981, Kirchentag became an important multiplying factor for the peace movement in West Germany as well as for the ecumenical conciliar process.

In East Germany after 1961, regional Kirchentage with a stronger conference character developed at various levels. A high point was reached with the seven Kirchentage for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther in 1983. By providing a free space available for debate, the Kirchentage in East Germany were significant building-blocks on the way to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.[16]

The pan-German function of Kirchentag plays a role again after reunification even if it is not as noticeable as in the 1950s. From the 1990s onwards, the Kirchentage have been marked by conspicuous plurality which is in many ways open to the charge of arbitrariness. This accusation, however, can only be made from a position which tries to preserve orderliness and does not allow itself to be swept up by flow of events as they take place once such a happening as Kirchentag is underway in a specific city. The cultural dimension became ever more apparent starting in the 1990s when Kirchentag became more of an event. It presents the form of a *potential* church, a church whose forms of belonging have a different "state of aggregation" from those of the parish. This applies to both the spatial and the temporal format of Kirchentag.[17]

The 1960s saw the establishment of another form of educational work at Kirchentag. At the Berlin Kirchentag in 1961, Jewish and Christian theologians came together for the first time in Germany since 1945 to read the Holy Scriptures together, discuss theology and learn from each other. The "Working Group Jews and Chris-

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[15] Cf. Feige, A & Lukatis, I (1989), The Religio-political Functions of the Present-Day 'Kirchentags' in West-Germany in the Context of Post-modern Societies, *Journal of Empirical Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 44–58; Haarsma, F (1989), 'The Theological Place of the Kirchentag between Local Congregation and Denomination', *Journal of Empirical Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 59–68; Pickel, G et al. (2015), *Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchentag – Religiöses Bekenntnis, politische Veranstaltung oder einfach nur ein Event? Eine empirische Studie zum Kirchentagsbesuch in Dresden und Hamburg,* Baden-Baden: Nomos.

[16] On the history of the Kirchentag in the German Democratic Republic cf. *Vertrauen wagen. Evangelischer Kirchentag in der DDR*, ed. Schröder, O & Peter, HD (1993), Berlin: verbum; Beier, P (1999), *Missionarische Gemeinde in sozialistischer Umwelt. Die Kirchentagskongreßarbeit in Sachsen im Kontext der SED-Kirchenpolitik (1968-1975)*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Hildebrandt, A & Tautz, L (2017), *Protestanten in Zeiten des Kalten Krieges. Der Wittenberger Kirchentag zum Lutherjubiläum 1983 im Fokus der Staatssicherheit*, Halle/S.: mdv; Ludewig, S (2020), *Fromm – fröhlich – (un)frei. Die Kirchentage der Evangelischen Landeskirche Greifswald und der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Landeskirche Mecklenburgs (1978-1988)*, Berlin: LIT-Verlag.

[17] Cf. Schroeter-Wittke, H (2017), 'Event(uelle) Kirche', in *Massen und Masken. Kulturwissenschaftliche und theologische Annäherungen*, ed. Janus, R et al., Wiesbaden: Springer VS, pp. 71–78; Renner, C (2020), *Phänomen Kirchentag. Event, Hybrid, Gemeinde? Praktisch-theologische Erkundungen*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer; Wisker, M (2021), *Events in der praktisch-theologischen Theoriebildung*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.

tians"[18] was an initial spark for the theological redefinition of the relationship between Jews and Christians in German Protestantism and is still an indispensable part of Kirchentag today. This working group has endured and overcome many crises in Jewish-Christian dialogue and represents a necessary critical voice in view of the growing anti-Semitic currents and incidents in Germany and worldwide. It has also become the initial spark for further interreligious dialogues at Kirchentag, especially with Islam. It is now a matter of course that, in addition to Jewish-Christian dialogues, there are also Christian-Islamic and Jewish-Christian-Islamic Bible studies.

Interfaith learning has also been part Kirchentag since the late 1980s. In the afternoon before the grand opening of Kirchentag, the victims of National Socialist tyranny and now also the victims of terrorist attacks from the extreme right-wing milieu, such as the victims of the National Socialist Underground, are commemorated at a memorial site in the respective Kirchentag city.

4. Structures of Kirchentag as place for formation

As a registered association, Kirchentag is independent of the church. Since 1959, it has been held every two years for five days in a series of cities in the German Federal Republic. Its three pillars, 1) biblical and theological work, 2) social and political responsibility and 3) liturgical and pastoral experience, are reflected in the broad structure of the days of events. Bible studies open the day without any competing items and later on during the day, various social problems are discussed in parallel lectures and debates until the early evening. The evenings, then, are reserved for cultural and liturgical events.

From the beginning, Kirchentag was described as a lay movement distinct from the clerical and parochial form of the church and based on freedom. Its invitation goes to "the unknown", as its founder emphasized repeatedly. What "lay" means cannot be completely defined in Protestantism,[19] unlike in Catholicism or in the Orthodox Churches. It is a matter of a concept which by its very imprecision permits many people to feel addressed, considered and accepted. The concept of "lay" is a counter-concept that marks the difference from "those up there" and precisely by this populism creates space for a formation which does not prescribe but liberates. In the 1950s, lay people in the ecumenical movement were seen primarily as standing at the border line between church and world, in a place where "worship of God in the world

[18] Cf. Kammerer, G (2001), *In die Haare, in die Arme. 40 Jahre Arbeitsgemeinschaft „Juden und Christen" beim Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentag*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

[19] Cf. Schroeter-Wittke, H (2021), 'Laienbewegung. Zur Produktivität einer für den Protestantismus unsauberen ekklesiologischen Kategorie', in: *Volkskirche in postsäkularer Zeit. Erkundungsgänge und theologische Perspektiven*, ed. Beckmayer, S & Mulia, C, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, pp. 301–319.

of everyday"[20] – and thus the very essence of the church – was decisively formed. To equip these lay people is the primary program of Kirchentag.

Its character as mass gathering was both planned and controversial from the start. Yet, it is only as mass happening that it becomes a media event and so constitutes a significant public manifestation of the church in Protestantism. Kirchentag in this form only exists in the *Volkskirche* typical of Germany because it makes use of the otherwise unused potential of volunteers.

In the 1960s, Kirchentag was also called a "Forum des Protestantismus" (forum of Protestantism) and an "evangelische Zeitansage" (evangelical word for the times), expressing its Protestant freedom and promoting the principle of controversial debate as a means of resolving problems. From the mid-1970s onwards, Kirchentag with its structures of participation again became popular enough to attract some 100,000 long-term visitors every two years beginning, half of whom were first time visitors. At the same time, the number of active volunteers in the 21st century amounts to about half of all Kirchentag visitors. Kirchentag thus has advanced to be one of the most important forms of experiential and experienced church – mostly with thoroughly positive results and associations. Those who know their home church as a minority Church find themselves in the majority at Kirchentag.

Finally, the description of Kirchentag as Protestant pilgrimage[21] expresses its experiential quality for the participants. In this sense, it can also be described as a journey of formation. The strength of Kirchentag lies in the fact that it creates facts through experience, and its theological teaching can at best re-view in retrospective reflection.

In Schleiermacher's sense, Kirchentag is more about presentation than effective action[22] even if many people expect effective action from it. Without this expectation, Kirchentag would no longer be alive. Kirchentag cannot say that this or that should be considered *status confessionis*, but it will do everything to enable a "processus confessionis". Thus, Kirchentag does not have strict confessional documents that it follows as other forms of church do. Yet, it encourages all people at the gathering to make a confession.

Despite many attempts, it is impossible to describe precisely what Kirchentag is. Nonetheless, this imprecision gives many visitors the chance to take part, to mix in, and to present themselves. It would shake the Kirchentag's Protestant self-understanding if this liberty of presentational participation were to be curtailed. The development of its structures towards more and more forms of co-determination and participation is therefore consistent even if it makes the Kirchentag event more confusing for outsiders and more prolonged for insiders. There is no way around this plurality.

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[20] Käsemann, E (1969), Worship in Everyday Life: A note on Romans 12, in: Idem, *New Testament Questions of Today*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, pp. 183–195.

[21] Cf. Schröer, H (1983), Kirchentag als evangelische Wallfahrt, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik und Theologie*, vol. 35, pp. 88–90.

[22] Cf. Kumlehn, M (1999), *Symbolisierendes Handeln. Schleiermachers Theorie religiöser Kommunikation und ihre Bedeutung für die gegenwärtige Religionspädagogik*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

5. Formative dimensions of Kirchentag

Thus, Kirchentag as a "language school of faith"[23] combines the following dimensions of formation in an outstanding way:

Self-formation. The astounding number of around 1,500 events during a Kirchentag demands a high degree of decision-making from participants combined with a high tolerance for fear of missing out, which is compensated for by the experience of a mass atmosphere which thus far has always clearly distanced itself from totalitarian mass phenomena.

Formation of trust. The Kirchentag experience first of all creates trust upon which knowledge of faith can grow. The participants are taken seriously as the subjects of their own formation, which takes shape particularly for the numerous participants in the "Market of Possibilities", the many cultural groups (music – theatre – cabaret) and those involved in various Kirchentag options (Service workshop – church music – many thousands playing brass instruments etc.).

Community formation. Kirchentage enable people who are often in a minority situation at home to have a majority-experience. They do this in a big city which is often deeply marked by secularization – a mark which is transformed for the duration of a Kirchentag. It is understandable that this does not please everybody for Kirchentage blur the boundary between private and public spheres.

Aesthetic formation. The mostly younger participants appreciate Kirchentag above all as a cultural event. As the Kirchentag culture is combined with an offer of formation, however, learning happens differently from the visitors' everyday life at school or work.

Political formation. With its platform occasions, forums, lecture series, keynote speeches, theme halls etc., Kirchentag brings many people active in politics live on stage. It is not only the prominent and famous (federal president, federal chancellor, federal and state ministers etc.) who are important, but also those who are brought in to enable a critical dialogue.

Theological formation. With its Bible studies and many innovative theological foci (feminist base faculty – Bible centre – halls of theology etc.), Kirchentag makes a considerable contribution which should not be underestimated to theological and also religious-political formation for non-theologians.

Ecumenical and interreligious formation. With its theological and social interfaith educational formats such as Bible studies, joint centres and joint celebrations, the Kirch-

[23] Ernst Lange (1927-1974) coined this concept, which Margot Käßmann (1998) applies to the Kirchentag: Kirche in der Zukunft – Impulse aus der Kirchentagsarbeit, *Deutsches Pfarrerblatt*, vol. 98, p. 657.

entag offers a high-profile forum with a widespread impact for Christian denominations and other religions to get to know each other and learn together.

Popcultural formation. Kirchentag is a form of church that works with the most important medium of pop culture: Kirchentag is good entertainment in the threefold sense of the German word *Unterhaltung*: It nourishes by supplying food for body and soul alike; it makes people come to talk to each other face to face and thereby supports conversation among equals; and, last but not least, Kirchentag is simply enjoyable and thus inspires people by entertainment. All three of these dimensions are necessary if Kirchentage are to remain religiously sensitive places for faith formation in the future.

Transformational spirituality. The Kirchentag is characterised by a non-identitarian piety that celebrates and learns from the fact that, in Christianity, the foreign person or aspect inspires and enriches one's own piety[24] so that the foreign person or aspect does not have to be excluded or even eradicated. That is why, as a mass event, it does not succumb to the temptations of totalitarianism that are inherent in all piety.

The presidium of Kirchentag has summarised this in twelve points on the occasion of the Reformation anniversary in 2017:

1. *Der Kirchentag ermöglicht Begegnung und Gemeinschaft aller, die nach dem christlichen Glauben offen, neugierig oder kritisch fragen.*
2. *Der Kirchentag hält gelebten Glauben und Weltverantwortung zusammen.*
3. *Der Kirchentag befähigt Laien zur Übernahme von Verantwortung in Kirche und Gesellschaft.*
4. *Der Kirchentag ist angewandte Reformation.*
5. *Der Kirchentag lebt von Partizipation.*
6. *Der Kirchentag ist ein Fest des Glaubens.*
7. *Der Kirchentag lebt inländische und weltweite Ökumene.*
8. *Der Kirchentag treibt den interreligiösen Dialog voran.*
9. *Der Kirchentag ist ein kulturelles Ereignis.*
10. *Der Kirchentag ist Bildungserlebnis.*
11. *Für den Kirchentag ist Barrierefreiheit ein Qualitätsmerkmal.*
12. *Der Kirchentag fühlt sich dem Grundanliegen der Bewahrung der Schöpfung verpflichtet.*[25]

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[24] Cf. Schroeter-Wittke, H (2019), Einladung an Unbekannt und nicht-identitäre Frömmigkeit. Die Bedeutung von Kirchentagen für die Praxis evangelischer Spiritualität, in *Handbuch Evangelische Spiritualität. Band 3: Praxis*, ed. Zimmerling, P., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 116–132.

[25] Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag (2015), Hoffnung, die uns antreibt. Grundsatzstatement des Kirchentages zum Reformationsjubiläum 2017. 12 Thesen, *Der Kirchentag. Das Magazin*, vol. 4, pp. 22–24 (translation by Anne Breckner): "1. Kirchentag enables encounters and fellowship for all those who question the Christian faith openly, curiously or critically. 2. Kirchentag brings together lived faith and world responsibility. 3. Kirchentag empowers lay people to take on responsibility in church and society. 4. Kirchentag is applied reformation. 5. Kirchentag lives

6. On the future of Kirchentag

The institution Kirchentag is currently undergoing the most far-reaching upheaval in its 75-year history. Participant numbers, which were consistently at 100,000 or more long-term participants between 1981 and 2013, have been falling continuously since 2015 and have dropped by more than half following the Covid-19 pandemic. Kirchentag is participating in the rapid processes of upheaval that are currently affecting the so-called *Volkskirche* in Germany but also in the rest of the Western world: There is less money available, social relevance of the churches is dwindling, the public image of the major churches has been permanently shaken by the scandals of sexual and spiritual abuse in the churches, the major churches are losing the basis of their existence. Kirchentag has played its part in these developments in its own way although it has always represented a constructive counter-world to the Protestant Church in Germany. Kirchentag lives and has lived from the structure of a *Volkskirche* that to a certain extent exists as a matter of course in German society. If this structure now disappears, then it is an open question whether and how Kirchentag can continue to exist – as urgently as it is needed!

The crisis of Kirchentag can also be seen in two other developments. The Ecumenical Kirchentage have taken place three times in 2003 in Berlin, 2010 in Munich and 2021 in Frankfurt/Main,[26] organized by the Kirchentag-team together with the Central Committee of German Catholics and their Katholikentag, which has existed continuously since 1848. After the threefold experience, both sides[27] agreed that, due to organizational and associated resource difficulties, they will not be planning any further ecumenical Kirchentage in the foreseeable future but will instead make ecumenism the basic dimension of the respective Kirchentage and Katholikentage. Since the early 2010s, Kirchentag and other church partners in Europe have been intensively pursuing the project of a European Christian Convention (ECC). However, the Belgian association that was founded in 2017 to support and organize this project has since been dissolved. Unfortunately, the European reality is so complex that it has not been possible to develop a common vision for an ECC that would have had a chance of concrete verification. Here, too, many issues that were tackled with a great deal of courage and good mutual will and trust failed due to the different sizes and structures

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from participation. 6. Kirchentag is a celebration of faith. 7. Kirchentag lives domestic and global ecumenism. 8. Kirchentag promotes interreligious dialogue. 9. Kirchentag is a cultural event. 10. Kirchentag is an educational experience. 11. For Kirchentag, accessibility is a quality feature. 12. Kirchentag is committed to the fundamental concern of preserving creation."

[26] Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the third Ecumenical Kirchentag was only held digitally and therefore lost much of its social and inner-church power. Although Kirchentage are increasingly in need of contact with the digital world, they ultimately thrive on the live experience.

[27] Attempts have always been made to involve the other Christian churches, in particular many free churches and Orthodox churches, on an equal footing, but this has always led to structural imbalances when it comes to financing these ecumenical Kirchentage, which have placed an unavoidable burden on the internal work.

of the partners involved and to the corresponding proportional requirements in terms of representation and finances.

Kirchentag is dealing with this crisis primarily by streamlining and professionalizing its structures and by slimming down its program, which has halved from 3,000 events in Dresden 2013 to 1,500 events in Hanover 2025. Whether these streamlining strategies will lead to a new empowerment is the question that will determine the future of Kirchentag.

Nevertheless, it has to be said: If the institution Kirchentag did not already exist, it would have to be invented especially in our present time. When Reinold von Thadden-Trieglaff founded the Kirchentag in 1949,[28] he responded – with his characteristic humour – to critical questions as to why he wanted to organize such a mass event again after the Nazi era: "Why surrender this important means of public expression of solidarity to the enemies of freedom?"[29] Echoing this, one could say in our days: Why surrender religion as an important means of public expression of solidarity to the enemies of religion and freedom especially to the "religious" enemies of religion and freedom?

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[28] Cf. Schroeter-Wittke, H (2017), "Why surrender this important means of public expression of solidarity to the enemies of freedom?" Die frühen Kirchentage als Event, in *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag. Wurzeln und Anfänge*, ed. Ueberschär, E. (2017), Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, pp. 220–252.

[29] Causton, B (1956), *Kirchentag Calling. The Story of the Protestant Laymen's Rally*, Bad Nauheim: Christian Verlag, p. 8: "Why, it may be asked, has the method of mass allies been used by the Kirchentag? Surely such rallies have been exploited all too efficiently by demagogues for spell-binding effect upon the German nation. Dr. von Thadden argued that that was no reason to despise the mass rally as such. Why surrender this important means of public expression of solidarity to the enemies of freedom?"

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Part II
Diversity and sacred texts

The Qur'ān and the Bible: subtext or text?

Jan M.F. Van Reeth

Abstract

To describe the Qur'ān's complex relationship to older Christian and Jewish texts, Biblical and para-Biblical, we now prefer the term "subtext" to "source". We illustrate this with the vision of the Table, about which the Qur'ān is truly innovative. A closer linguistic analysis of the terminology in the description of this Table, however, reveals the ramifications of the passage in its cultural surroundings, both exegetically and theologically, and shows how the Qur'ān is embedded in a complex religious tradition.

Keywords

Subtext, Reynolds, Mary, Table from Heaven, Lord's Supper, Mother of the Book, Syriac and Ethiopian Christianity, Manichaeism

Introduction: subtext or source?

According to the Egyptian theologian Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid (1943–2010), Islām is the civilization of the text, whereas ancient Egypt was the civilization of the hereafter and Greek culture the civilization of reason.[1] This predominance of Scripture implies that, with a God who reveals himself through a book, the Qur'ān is for Muslims what Jesus is to Christians: the Word of God. Consequently, the divine speech is defined differently from the outset. As this distinction is not always explicitly thematized in theological discourse, fundamental misunderstandings quickly arise. Jews and Christians share a part of their sacred founding text (what some Christians call the "Old Testament"), something that Muslims and Christians do not. Many Biblical stories are presented differently in the Qur'ān. These differences in narrative are explained in various ways by the respective theologians but also by secular scholars, philologists, and historians of religion. Muslims, Christians and Jews who are not familiar with exegesis and textual analysis can therefore easily get caught up in all sorts of misunderstandings. As religious communities increasingly come into contact with each other, it may be important to investigate this issue in some depth as one of the basic problems concerning religious diversity with regard to Islām.

[1] Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid (1990), *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* (نصر حامد أبو زيد، مفهوم النص: دراسة في علوم القرآن), Beirut: الهيئه المصرية العامة للكتاب, p. 9.

Even if one could speak in Islām about a form of *inlibratio* through revelation (*ḥadarat al-naṣṣ*)[2], the Qur'ān remained nevertheless according to Abu Zayd a cultural product, a collection of texts that has to be recontextualized in order to interpret it correctly. This idea about the contextualization of the Qur'ān is indeed one of the main endeavours of all Muslim reformers[3] who insist that every Qur'ānic instruction should always be situated in its historical, ancient Arabian environment, and only afterwards re-actualized so that it may fit as adapted to a modern society.

This is at first sight an attractive aim and method; it might seem an appropriate way to modernise Islām.[4] Almost immediately a rather unsolvable question arises: what do we know about pre-Islāmic society? There is the traditional view: that of the primitive pagan Arab world-view[5] that was all of a sudden and almost miraculously converted into a monotheistic new religion by one man – Muḥammad. More and more, however, thanks to archaeological discoveries for instance in the Gulf region and Yemen as well as to an increasing number of inscriptions,[6] the image of a more complex society emerges, in which Judaism and Christianity played an important role during at least the last two centuries before Islām.

Furthermore, it is undeniable that most of the stories contained in the Qur'ān have a Jewish and Christian background and are focussed on Biblical figures: Adam, Abraham, Ismael, Moses, Jona, Jesus and Mary …[7] Their Qur'ānic stories are clearly related to Biblical narratives so that one way or the other they have to be interdependent. In scholarly tradition, at least from the 19th century onwards and only by those who are inclined to a form of *Quellenforschung* in contrast to the majority of the adherents of Nöldeke who, following Islāmic examples, are "explaining the Qur'ān with constant reference to the *sīra*".[8] this search for literary relationship has been mostly undertaken in one direction as one from (Biblical) *source* to its Islāmic *reception*: the Qur'ān is then part of the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of the Bible and its exegetical tradition.

Scholars quickly remarked the strange rearrangements or even confusions that occur in many Qur'ānic presentations. A good example of this is the apparent fusion of

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2 Wild, St (2001), *Mensch, Prophet und Gott im Koran. Muslimische Exegeten des 20. Jahrhunderts und das Menschenbild der* Moderne, Münster: Rhema Verlag, p. 6.

3 Abdullah Saeed (2014), *Reading the Qur'an in the twenty-first century: A contextualist* approach, New York: Routledge; Leirvik, O (2017), Handling problematic texts: ethical critique and moral enrichment, in: Sinn, S. (e.a., ed.), *Transformative readings of sacred scriptures. Christians and Muslims in dialogue* (The Lutheran World Federation, Documentation 62), Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, p. 22.

4 See my critical remarks about such a procedure: Van Reeth (2021), 'Peace, violence and Holy War according to the Qur'ān', in: Temmerman, J (ed.), *Religious radicalism. Demarcations and challenges*, Brussels: ASP, pp. 151–152.

5 Robin, ChrJ (2022), 'L'Arabie préislamique', in: Amir-Moezzi, MA & Dye, G (ed.), *Histoire du Coran: contexte, origine, rédaction*, Paris: Le Cerf, pp. 131–134.

6 Robin, 'L'Arabie préislamique', pp. 57–59, 61 sqq.

7 Dye, G (2022), 'Le corpus coranique: contexte et composition', in: *Histoire du Coran*, pp. 871–873.

8 Reynolds, GS (2010), *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical subtext* (Routledge studies in the Quran), Abingdon: Routledge, p. 255; Dye, *Le corpus coranique: contexte et composition*, pp. 851–856.

'Imrān, father of Moses, Myriam and Aaron, the sacerdotal companion of Moses, with 'Imrān the father of the virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, notwithstanding the enormous gap of time that one would have to postulate between those two.[9] An easy way that was often invoked by orientalists in order to explain such anomalies has been oral transmittance: Muḥammad would have learned Biblical stories from hearsay and his memory would have distorted and confused certain events.[10] But on the whole, the Prophet seems to have gathered his Biblical knowledge from all kinds of Jewish and Christian sources – canonical as well as apocryphal and legendary ones.

Basic hypothesis for the redaction of the Qur'ān-text has thus been according to a great deal of scholars, oral transmission and oral composition. This theory has acquired almost mythical proportions. It is, however, highly questionable.[11] Some stories are so close to their Biblical counterpart (as for instance the description of the birth and childhood of Jesus in Q 5:110 and 19:22–33[12]) that a kind of written redaction seems to have been needed from the outset.[13]

However, the special form of the Qur'ānic discourse has to be taken into account. Qur'ānic Biblical stories are conceived and developed in *Auseinandersetzung mit ihren biblischen Vorlagen* – in a certain form of dialogue, conversation and response to their Biblical sources or subtexts. What the Qur'ān is offering to its readers or audience is a sort of developments, explanations, exegesis, but also spiritual reflections about what it highlights from the Jewish and Christian tradition.[14] That is why it has been observed that the basic aspect of the Qur'ānic literary form is very much comparable to Syriac metrical sermons called *mēmrê*.[15]

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[9] Lory, P (2007), 'Imrān et sa famille', in: Amir-Moezzi, MA (ed.), *Dictionnaire du Coran*, Paris: Robert Laffront, pp. 417–418; Samir, SKh, 'The theological Christian influence on the Qur'ān', in: Reynolds, GS (2008), *The Qur'ān in its historical context,* Abingdon: Routledge, p. 143.

[10] For a more symbolic explanation of this "confusion", partly justifying it, see Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical subtext,* p. 144–146; see also his recension: G.S. Reynolds (2012), 'rec. Michel Cuypers, Le festin. Une lecture de la sourate al-Mā'ida, Paris 2007', *Der Islam* 88, p. 428: "This conclusion, Cuypers maintains, reflects the failure of scholars to recognize that the Qur'ān was written not in a linear manner, but rather (and like the Hebrew Bible) in the manner of Semitic rhetoric."

[11] See also the critical remarks of Dye, 'Le corpus coranique: contexte et composition', pp. 914–915.

[12] See Van Reeth (2017), 'Le *Vaticinans Puer* II: L'Enfant Jésus dans le Coran', in: Hämeen-Anttila, J, Koskikallio, P & Lindstedt, I (ed.), *Contacts and Interaction. Proceedings of the 27th Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants Helsinki 2014* (OLA 254) Louvain: Peeters, pp. 393–404.

[13] Dye, Le corpus coranique p. 915, referring to Kloppenborg, J. (2012), 'Memory, performance and the sayings of Jesus', *Journal for the Study of Historical Jesus* 10, p. 105.

[14] Reynolds, *Subtext* 2, p. 255: "He thus exhibits the remarkable conversation that the Qur'an conducts with the various texts of that tradition."

[15] Reynolds, *Subtext*, p. 249–253; Gilliot, C (2011), 'Le Coran, production littéraire de l'Antiquité tardive ou Mahomet interprète dans le «lectionnaire arabe» de La Mecque', *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 129, pp. 34, 43 and Van Reeth (2006), 'Le Coran et ses scribes', *Acta Orientalia Belgica*, 19, pp. 78–80; Van Reeth (2014), 'Les Fardes de la Révélation. Une hypothèse sur la forme du Coran originel', *Acta Orientalia Belgica*, 27, p. 146.

In order to speak about Biblical and Christian literary sources, one should postulate a kind of interdependence in such a sense, that the Prophet and/or his scribes would have had such texts on his desk and would have copied or at least paraphrased them. But in many cases, intertextuality appears to have been more complicated. Therefore, we should use the concept of subtext rather than the concept of source, in the way that it was very well defined by Gabriel Said Reynolds: "the collection of traditions that the Qur'ān refers to in its articulation of a new religious message."[16] As we shall see, the introduction of this category by the American scholar was a brilliant idea indeed. It does not imply from the outset that Muḥammad was more or less copying mechanically. As Reynolds was himself suggesting, "the Qur'ān's relationship to its subtext is like the relationship of homily and scripture".[17] This is most certainly true but not exclusively; the close correspondence between text and subtext is sometimes even more complex and nuanced.

We shall demonstrate how this functioned in practice by the following case-study about one of the many *cruces interpretum* in the Qur'ān: the mysterious Table which is sent down from heaven by Jesus according to *Sūrat al-mā'ida* (*Sura* 5), verses 112–115.

A Table from Heaven

Gabriel Said Reynolds was himself the author of an important paper about the Qur'ānic description of this holy Table; he furthermore wrote the commentary of the passage for the *Coran des Historiens*. And what is more: he was the editor of two equally important studies about the tale of the Table by Manfred Kropp and Samir Khalil Samir. All the authors who up to the present time ventured to point to a certain passage of the Bible or any other Christian or Jewish tradition as a possible source have been more or less successful or unsuccessful: there is no clear, unequivocal, unique source.[18] They all seem to have disclosed part of the background of the Qur'ānic text, while others seem to supply something about the remaining part. This led some Muslim authors to the conclusion that the Qur'ān here describes an event in the life of Jesus that was not related in the Gospels.[19]

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[16] Reynolds, *Subtext*, p. 36.

[17] Reynolds, *Subtext*, p. 233.

[18] Comerro, V (2001), 'La nouvelle alliance dans la sourate *al-Mā'ida* ', *Arabica* 48.3, p. 305; Reynolds, GS (2012), 'On the Qur'ān's *Mā'ida* passage and the wanderings of the Israelites', in: Segovia, CA & Lourié, B (ed.), *The coming of the Comforter: when, where, and to Whom?*, Piscataway: Gorgias Press, p. 93; Goudarzi, M. (2023), 'The Eucharist in the Qur'an', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 34.2, p. 114.

[19] Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr, 3:231, cited by Goudarzi, 'Eucharist', p. 114 note 5; Boubakeur, Si Ḥamza (1979), *Le Coran*, vol. 1, Paris: Fayard, p. 332: "Tous ces rapprochements ne sont que des conjectures. Pourquoi ne pas admettre le fait tel qu'il est: il s'agit d'un événement de la vie de Jésus qui est rapporté par le Coran et dont on ne trouve pas mention dans les quatre Évangiles officialisés par l'Église"; Cuypers, M. (2007), *Le Festin. Une relecture de la sourate* al-Mâ'ida, Paris: Lethielleux, p. 339.

Let us start by citing the text of *Sura* 5, in the translation by Richard Bell, who observes: "this section (…) is apparently based, not on any knowledge of the New Testament, but on some hearsay information about the Christian sacrament" (but, as we already stated, we do not so much believe in such a "hearsay"!):[20]

> "When the Apostles said: 'O Jesus, son of Mary, is your Lord able to send down on us a table from heaven?' He replied: 'Show piety towards Allah, if you are believers.' They said: 'Our desire is that we may eat from it and our hearts be at peace, that we may know that you have spoken truthfully to us and that to it we may be amongst the witnesses.' Jesus, son of Mary, said: 'O Allah our Lord, send down to us a table from the heaven, to be to us a festival, to the first and to the last of us, and a sign from You, and do You provide for us, for You are the best of providers.' Allah said: 'Verily I am going to send down to you; so if any of you afterwards disbelieve, I shall assuredly punish them as I punish no one else of (all) the worlds.'"

The passage has often been linked to the Last Supper.[21] In the New Testament, however, there is no mention of a table or meal coming down from heaven[22]. Furthermore, unfortunately, "the Qur'ān does not explain where, when, or why the companions of Jesus made this request of him, why Jesus was reluctant to assent, and why the request exasperated God".[23] In his commentary on the text, Reynolds supposes that Christians must have formed an important social group where the Sura was proclaimed[24]. If this would be indeed the case, then the question rises, where and when this happened: in the days of the Prophet when he was still alive (the *Sura* is traditionally dated in the late Medinan period, as one of the latest if not the latest to be

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[20] Bell, R (1937), *The Qur'ān. Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs* 1, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, p. 111 (I changed the old forms of the pronominal with their corresponding verbal forms). Bell thus joins the opinion of Nöldeke, T & Schwally, F (1909[2]), *Geschichte des Qorāns*, 1 *Über den Ursprung des Qorāns*, Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, pp. 8–9.

[21] 'Abd al-Tafāhum [= A. Kenneth Cragg], (1959), 'The Qur'ān and the holy communion', Muslim World 49, pp. 239–248 (the link that the author has tried – pp. 242–246 – to establish between the Table of the Qur'ān and the Eucharist as commemoration of the Crucifixion seems rather farfetched); Comerro, 'La nouvelle alliance', p. 306; Goudarzi, 'Eucharist', pp. 114, 117–118; Radscheit, M (2006), 'Table', in: The Encyclopedia of the Qur'an vol. 5, p. 189; Reynolds, GS (2019), 'Sourate 5: al-mā'ida (La Table)', in: Amir-Moezzi, MA & Dye, G (ed.), Le Coran des Historiens, vol. 2. Commentaire et analyse du texte coranique 1. Sourates 1 à 26, Paris: Le Cerf, p. 232. We should remark that still other passages from the Qur'ān have already been linked to a Eucharistic prayer or the Lord's Supper, see Luxenberg, C (2015[5]), Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache, Berlin: Hans Schiller, pp. 328–333 (concerning Q 96:19), and my art. Van Reeth, 'Eucharistie im Koran', in: Groß, M & Ohlig, KH (ed.) (2008), Schlaglichter. Die beiden ersten islamischen Jahrhunderte (Inârah – Schriften zur frühen Islamgeschichte und zum Koran, vol. 3), Berlin: Hans Schiller, pp. 457–460.

[22] Goudarzi, 'Eucharist', p. 116.

[23] Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', p. 91.

[24] Reynolds, 'Sourate 5: *al-mā'ida*', p. 203.

revealed[25]), while still being in Arabia, Mecca or Medina, or where the final redaction of the Qur'ān-text took place, in Jerusalem or Damascus? These are of course, very delicate questions, sometimes impossible to answer, requiring also specific redactional investigations that are not really at stake here.

Samir, however, rightly observed that the rather strange word *mā'ida* (مَائِدَة), as we shall explain further on, of Ethiopian origin,[26] refers originally to the Lord's Supper.[27] The word *'īd* also, with the significance of a *feast*, would similarly point to a liturgical festival.[28] It could be derived from the Syrian *'ēdâ*. We already have tried elsewhere to show that the celebration in question may have had a Manichaean background, related to the celebration of the *bèma*.[29] Furthermore, the expression "to the first and to the last of us" (Q 5:114 – لِأَوَّلِنَا وَءَاخِرِنَا) would, according to Samir, be a translation of some wordings of the Gospel: Matthew 26:28, τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον ("which is poured out for many") and Mark 14:24, ὑπὲρ πολλῶν.[30] This suggestion might be correct. In that case it would be better to translate, in the light of the analysis of Samir and according to the precise sense of the text of the NT, the phrase of the Qur'ān as: "for us and for the others".

Nevertheless, there are in the Qur'ān some apparent differences with the description of the Lord's Supper; therefore, others have preferred to invoke another text of the New Testament, in Acts 10:9–19:

> "About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'
>
> 'Surely not, Lord!' Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.'
>
> The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'
>
> This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

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[25] Comerro, 'La nouvelle alliance', pp. 285, 289; Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 17; Reynolds, 'rec. Michel Cuypers, Le festin', p. 433.

[26] See further, note 36.3.

[27] Jeffery, A (1938), *The foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Gaekwad's Oriental Series 70), Baroda: Oriental Institute (Leiden: Brill 2007), p. 255; Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 334 (see further note 44).

[28] Comerro, 'La nouvelle alliance', p. 307.

[29] See our art. 'Eucharistie im Koran', pp. 459–460; Luxenberg, *Die Syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran*, p. 332 note 355. This might be related to the periodicity of the celebration (see Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 344: "certains commentateurs, dont Râzî (…) y voient une allusion à la celebration annuelle de la Pâque chrétienne").

[30] Samir, 'Theological Christian influence', pp. 148–149. Here and elsewhere, Biblical texts are cited according to the *New International Version* (NIV).

> While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.
>
> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Simon, three men are looking for you.'"[31]

In this passage, certain motifs correspond at first sight better with its Qur'ānic counterpart than with the description of the Lord's Supper. The table in *Acts* clearly descends from heaven, with a series of animals on it, to be slaughtered, prepared and eaten.

It might be of some interest to establish what is meant by this "table". According to the Greek, it is a σκεῦος, a vessel,[32] looking like an ὀθόνη, a sheet, that was upheld at its four extremities (ἀρχαῖς). It appears that what is meant is not an ordinary table. So, what is it? The answer must remain for the moment unsolved.

Also, its appearance has a similar effect as the Table from the Qur'ān: it is to be a sign of contradiction; those who do not believe in its significance shall endure divine retaliation. There are also some significant differences: the coming down of a Table is, in the presentation of the Acts, only a vision and not reality as it is in the Qur'ān. Furthermore, the event is about Peter and it is not Jesus who implores something to come down from heaven.[33]

This might be the reason why for instance Gabriel Reynolds has more recently been thinking of still another event from the New Testament, namely about the multiplication of bread.[34] Even if there are indeed some similarities, even if the provenance of the bread is not indicated in this text, it is not even suggested anywhere that those pieces of bread would have been brought from heaven.[35] To the contrary, this is clearly not what is suggested: the chunks of bread are only multiplied. But even so, John 6:51 and 6:58 contain some important subtexts behind the Qur'ān, such as:

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[31] NIV.

[32] Fitzmyer, JA (1998) *The Acts of the Apostles*, (The Anchor Bible), New York: Yale University Press, p. 454. In the Syriac (Peshitta of the NT) version we read ܡܚܬܐ ; the meaning is similar as in Greek: it is an *instrument*, an *utensil*, but it is interesting to note that the term is also sometimes used to indicate an eucharistic chalice. Pesch, R (1986), *Die Apostelgeschichte* (EKK V/1), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, p. 338, underlines the cosmic dimensions of the vessel: "Der Inhalt des Gefäßes entspricht seinen Ausmaßen; es enthält *alle* Tiere der Schöpfung". The vision wants to prove that everything that is coming from heaven, has to be considered as clean, see also Weiser, A (1981), *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar zum NT 5/1), Gütersloh: Mohn, pp. 264–265. In our art. 'Eucharistie im Koran', p. 459, we furthermore underlined the eschatological aspect of the vessel and the vision.

[33] Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 340.

[34] John 6: 1–13, 'Abd al-Tafāhum, 'The Qur'ān and the holy communion', p. 240; Reynolds, 'Sourate 5: *al-mā'ida* ', p. 231. See already Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 255; Comerro, 'La nouvelle alliance', pp. 306–308.

[35] Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 340.

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven" and "this is the bread that came down from heaven".[36]

So, one could say, as neither of the particular New Testament texts invoked thus far is sufficient to "explain" what we read in the Qur'ān, we have to assume that its verses are providing us with a kind of a paraphrase of these Biblical "sources". It is a new composition which gives the preceding texts a new "original sense".[37] It is an elucidation, a development of what according to the Qur'ān is the essential meaning of a collection of Biblical readings. This is precisely the function of a sermon. It is what every preacher is doing after the reading of a series of Biblical texts during a religious service: to resume and to explain them, in the light of the more or less artificial liturgical interrelationship imparted between those texts. In that sense the Qur'ān is indeed a homiletic text.

As no New Testament text can explain every detail in the Qur'ānic story, some scholars have been looking in the Old Testament. It seemed appropriate to look for Old Testament prefigurations of the multiplication of the bread by Jesus.[38] This is what Gabriel Reynolds has been proposing. He invokes a series of texts about the Exodus where the Lord was providing a "banquet" (שׁלחן – LXX τράπεζα) from heaven: bread (*manna*), quails and water from a rock.[39] Reynolds refers for instance to Psalm 78:15–22 and further also to Exodus 16:1–4 and 17: 2–3 and Numbers 11.[40] Here indeed food is really coming down from heaven, not during a vision as with Peter in Acts and with a prayer that is not Eucharistic, just as in the Qur'ān. Also, according to the Psalmist, God is truly being tested by his people, the Israelites,[41] which is once more reminiscent of the Qur'ān. But as Reynolds himself remarks: "The problem we are left with, of course, is that Jesus" has nothing to do with the Exodus-story; "why, then, would the Qur'ān insert Jesus into a passage based on an Old Testament narrative?"[42] The answer that Reynolds advanced is basically correct: "The Qur'ān is invested in paraenesis. The Qur'ān is a profoundly homiletic book. (…) the Qur'ān's relationship with Biblical material is creative."[43]

The Mother of the Book and the Divine Word: an interreligious subtext?

That is why we have to conclude that all the Biblical texts invoked thus far are not so much sources but rather subtexts of the Qur'ān, on which the Prophet has been com-

[36] Comerro, 'La nouvelle alliance', pp. 306–307; Cuypers, *Le Festin*, pp. 340–343.

[37] Cf. Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 345.

[38] Comerro, 'La nouvelle alliance', p. 307.

[39] See Maiberger, P (1984), מן, in: Botterweck, GJ (e.o., ed.), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament* 4, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, col. 973–975.

[40] 'Abd al-Tafāhum, 'The Qur'ān and the holy communion', p. 240; Reynolds, 'Sourate 5: *al-mā'ida*', p. 232.

[41] Kraus, HJ (19785), *Psalmen* (Biblischer Kommentar – Altes Testament XV/2), Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, pp. 708–709.

[42] Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', p. 103.

[43] Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', p. 104.

menting. These Biblical subtexts have to be taken together into a kind of synthesis that only existed in the mind of the Prophet (or whoever is to be considered as author of the Qur'ān). Together, they form the occasion – maybe a preceding liturgical reading of the Biblical texts – that triggered these comments in the reflection of the Prophet. The author of the Qur'ān is not merely copying older texts; his developments of Biblical themes is the result of inspiring interdependence.

From a Muslim point of view, however, the distinction between texts and subtexts could follow a direction that is exactly the opposite. The classical doctrine of *taḥrīf* implies that the Bible contains falsifications of the original form of the divine discourse, which God inspired to all his prophets. If that were the case, the truly original revelation is to be found not in the Bible but in the Qur'ān.[44] Biblical and Qur'ānic texts are both dependent from a divine and heavenly original, the "Mother of all Books"[45] of which the Qur'ān preserves the only reliable, authentic form. If one chooses to adhere to this thesis, one may simply inverse the sequence of events as far as the transmission of Revelation is concerned. In that case Biblical and para-Biblical texts are providing us with what are the ultimate developments of a tradition; in such a case the Qur'ān becomes their subtext. But even so, no one can nor should deny that there are correspondences between Bible and Qur'ān. The interrelation between the Biblical tradition and the Qur'ān is so self-evident that it is irrefutable. It is then up to Muslim theologians to explain how, starting from the Qur'ān, Jewish and Christian exegesis could have been developed from the eternal, pre-existential, Qur'ānic original. Basically, the relation between the two is not so much about copying; it is rather a matter of exegesis, in one direction or the other.

A conclusion could be that the notion of subtext, so brilliantly developed by Gabriel Reynolds, may give Muslim theologians the opportunity to develop a theology without denying or ignoring the results of comparative studies, relating Bible to Qur'ān, in whatever direction. In the end, one should perhaps understand the notorious verse: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:257), the way Mullā Ṣadrā did: religion being something from the heart as an intimate conviction, no exterior contrition may affect it[46] confining the mind into a biased straitjacket.

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[44] Voir aussi Chaumont, É, 'Abrogation', in: *Dictionnaire du Coran*, p. 15.

[45] The so-called *umm al-Kitāb* – Q 13:39 and 43:4, cf. 56:78 and 85:22, Tesei, T, 'Sourate 13: *al-raʿd* (le Tonnerre)', in: *Le Coran des Historiens* II.1, pp. 568-569; Arkoun, M, '«Coran»: sens coranique', in: *Dictionnaire du Coran*, p. 188; Gobillot, G, 'Table bien gardée', in: ibidem, p. 852; Madigan, D (2001), 'Book', in: J. Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 1, Leiden: Brill, p. 247. It remains however extremely difficult to determine the exact original meaning of the concept of the *umm al-Kitāb* in the Qur'ān itself, independently of what has been made out of it by the Islamic tradition, as becomes clear from the excellent and very well nuanced analysis by Boisliveau, AS, 'Sourate 43 al-Zukhruf (L'Ornement)', in: *Le Coran des Historiens* II.2, pp. 1416–1419.

[46] Jambet, Ch (2011), *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie islamique?* Paris: Gallimard, pp. 390–391: "La religion (…) suppose le consentement, l'acceptation du décret divin (…). Or, cette acceptation ne peut venir que des fermes positions nées de la science authentique."

Furthermore, there is still another conclusion that we should deduce from our analysis. Recent studies are more and more revealing – and explaining – the close interrelationship between Christian, mostly Syriac Christian, and also Jewish traditions, on the one hand, and the Qur'ān on the other. These relations are, of course, visible at first sight and were already known to the classical Muslim commentators of the Qur'ān from the Middle Ages. But modern scholarship is venturing to identify in an increasingly exact way the Syriac, Ethiopic and Jewish subtexts that together, in one way or the other, constitute the foundations of Islām. The result of all this is, that oriental Christianity, foremost of the Syriac tradition, proves to be much more closely related to the Qur'ān and to the origins of Islam than one would be inclined to believe at first sight without such advancing knowledge. Furthermore, Syriac Christianity has on many Biblical and doctrinal topics often a quite different opinion than the more classical, Greek "orthodox", formulations that one is used to and therefore these correspondences are sometimes difficult to grasp and to explain for scholars, formed in the traditional theology of the Church. That is why these Oriental, Syriac antecedents have so often escaped the attention of historical and text-critical analysis. This is only to prove how important modern studies of the Qur'ān are: They are bringing to light correspondences that can only be to the advantage of interreligious and intercultural relations – and this hopefully coming from both sides.[47] Syriac Christianity is much more close to Islām than what is generally believed. Without Syriac Christendom, Islām would lose its natural *alter ego*, with which the Qur'ān is in a certain sense involved in a constant implicit dialogue. Without its Syriac and Ethiopian background, Islām would even lose part of its discursive identity: What would Christian stories and polemics in the Qur'ān refer to?[48]

A moderate, 'white' religion

The foregoing hopeful conclusions should not prevent us, however, to make yet another step in our comparative investigations. Indeed, the results achieved thus far remain inconclusive and vague. No Biblical text fully explains what we read in the Qur'ān or *vice versa*. Something seems to escape us. Or, at least, it remains problematic to define what the message of the Qur'ān could have been, while evoking the Table that Jesus made descend from heaven.

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[47] One may compare the stimulating remarks by Grodzki, M (2014), 'The Christian-Muslim dialogue in the light of recent unorthodox scientific research on the genesis of Islam', in: Groß, M & Ohlig, KH (ed.), *Die Entstehung einer Weltreligion III* (Inârah. Schriften zur frühen Islamgeschichte und zum Koran 7), Berlin: Hans Schiller, pp. 793–802.

[48] This was the point made by Muhammad al-Sammak, Political Counsellor of the Grand Mufti of Lebanon, in his remarkable allocution before the Synod of Bishops (10–24 Oct. 2010) at the Vatican (and in several interviews afterwards): "The Christians of the East are (…) at the origins of the presence of the East before Islam. They are an integral part of the cultural, literary and scientific formation of Islamic civilization" – https://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_24_speciale-medio-oriente-2010/02_inglese/b12_02.html.

First of all, there is the word for the Table itself: *mā'ida* (مَائِدَة). There is a consensus among philologists that this can only be derived from the Ethiopic *mā'əd(d)ə*, the word that translates *shulḥān* (שׁלחן) in *Psalm* 78:19[49]. The Hebrew *shulḥān* (שׁלחן) however, is not so much a table as we would conceive it; the verb שׁלח means "to stretch, to spread out, to unfold": it is more like a tapestry or piece of skin that is put on the ground in the middle of a Bedouin tent and on which food is exposed.[50]

The Ethiopian term *mā'əd(d)ə* was in its turn borrowed from the Greek μαγίς (dim. μαγίδιον) meaning a "kneading trough or dresser; also round pan or plate for placing on the τρίπους" (tripod)[51], or even from later Latin, where *magis* or *magida* occurs, derived from the Greek, with a similar meaning.[52] The concept was thus imported from the Greek and Roman world, but what the Ethiopians must have had in mind while translating Biblical expressions with their word *mā'əd(d)ə*, was of course an Ethiopian "table". Ethiopians still nowadays put a large metal plate or flat hamper on the ground or on a low platform and sit tailor-fashion around it. On this dish, they spread a flat bread in the form of a large pancake. It is on this large piece of bread that all kinds of food are directly exposed. The guests all eat by using similar small pieces of flat bread to take something from the different kinds of food before them between their fingers.

This is certainly what Ethiopians and other Bedouins must have had in mind while reading the vision of Saint Peter: In their imagination, it was such a kind of table that was descending from heaven, which "contained all kinds of four-footed animals, reptiles and birds", as the text of Acts states. And in fact, this representation of what a table is supposed to be, is not so far from what the Greeks indicated by their word μαγίς: this helps us to explain why the Ethiopians must have preferred this loan word above the other, *tarapeza*, which is also derived from the Greek – τράπεζα.[53] What is more: the traditional Bedouin table in the tents of the Arab desert has a very similar form and therefore it is not to be excluded that Muḥammad and the Arabs, while borrowing their word *mā'ida* (مَائِدَة) from the Ethiopians, may have also thought at second glance about their word stem *m-y-d*, meaning "to waver, to swing, to be

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[49] Same word in the Ethiopic version of 1Cor 10:21, Fraenkel, S (1880), *De vocabulis in antiquis Arabum carminibus et in Corano peregrinis*, Leiden: Brill, p. 24; Nöldeke, Th (1910), *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft*, Strassburg: Trübner, pp. 54–55; Vollers, K (1897), 'Beiträge zur Kenntniss der lebenden arabischen Sprache', *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 51, p. 294; Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 255; Kropp, M, 'Beyond single words', in: Reynolds, *The Qur'ān in its historical* context, pp. 206–207; Reynolds, '*Sourate 5: al-mā'ida* ', pp. 231–232. The imagery of the plain, richly filled table recalls Psalm 23: 5, cf. Hossfeld, FL & Zenger, E (2000), *Psalmen 51–100* (HThKAT), Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, p. 435.

[50] Höhne, E & Reicke, B (1966), 'Tisch', in: Reicke, B & Rost, L, *Biblisch-Historisches Handwörterbuch* vol. 3, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, col. 1992.

[51] Liddell, HG & Scott, R (many editions and reprints), *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 1071; cf. 'Abd al-Tafāhum, 'The Qur'ān and the holy communion', p. 240.

[52] Lewis, ChT & Short Ch (many editions and reprints), *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 1097.

[53] Kropp, 'Beyond single words', p. 207.

moved",[54] from which the word *mīdān* (ميدان) is derived (indicating an open place, a square), as this concept might also describe what the typical Ethiopian – and Arabian – pancake, used as a kind of table, is looking like. So we retain for the moment this concept of a "table" in the form of a pancake, with all sorts of food presented on top of it.

Next, there is a second important term in the Table-scene of the Qur'ān. This is the word that indicates the people addressing Jesus: they are called *ḥawāriyyūn* (ٱلْحَوَارِيُّونَ). This noun *ḥawāriyyūn* is differently translated. Bell – whose Qur'ān-translation we have been citing – has "Apostles", just as George Sale translated it already;[55] Reynolds prefers "companions", arguing that "the Qur'ān could hardly be invoking this term in the way a Christian text would".[56] Whatever this may be, the word *ḥawāriyyūn* seems also to be from Ethiopian origin, *ḥawāryā* meaning a "walker", a messenger. In the Ethiopic version of the Gospel, it indicates the Apostles.[57] However, there might be a secundary imaginery associated to the word, as the verb حَوِرَ means "to be shining, glistering white". Some ancient commentators think the origin of the name is Nabataean and indicates "washermen"; in Syriac سمّغ means "to become white" and thus the Apostles would have been wearing white clothing, "because of the purity of their inward life".[58]

If this is indeed the case, than these verses about the conversation of Jesus with his companions would perfectly fit in the purpose of what the Prophet has been saying elsewhere about the "white" character of his creed. As we have already tried to demonstrate in the wake of Moshe Gil's research about the discussion between the Prophet and Abū ʿĀmir, the Prophet would have defined his religion as a kind of moderate Manichaeism. The idea ultimately goes back to a certain interpretation of Biblical texts that is to be found in the *Shepherd of Hermas* and clearly appears in Elchasaism, Elchasai being the immediate precursor and even teacher of Mani. Some of Bardaiṣan's ideas may also be involved.[59] There the *electi* in order to display their purity were wearing white robes. As if being one of them, the Prophet solemny declared

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[54] Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', p. 96 mentions the stem *m-y-d*, only to remark that the word does not help much to explain the meaning of the term *mā'ida*.

[55] Sale, G (1734 and many editions and reprints), *The Korân*, London, p. 116. Translate also by "Apostles", "Apôtres": Bell, Cuypers, *Le Festin*, pp. 321–322 (&c.), Berque, Rodwell, Arberry, Masson, Kramers.

[56] Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', p. 96. Paret: "die Jünger"; Dawood et Montet: "disciples"; Chouraqui: "adeptes"; Leemhuis: "discipelen". See the rather obscure remark by Si Ḥamza Boubakeur, *Le Coran* 1, p. 395.

[57] For ex. in Mc 6:30, Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 116; Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 322; Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', pp. 95-97 + n. 7; Reynolds, 'Sourate 5: *al-mā'ida*', p. 231.

[58] Jeffery, *Foreign vocabulary*, p. 116; Boubakeur, Si Ḥamza, *Le Coran* 1, p. 395.

[59] For Bardaiṣan (ca. 154–222) as the starting point of this entire dualistic tradition, see my remarks, Van Reeth (2016), 'La robe blanche des serviteurs de Dieu.' 'Adī b. Zayd, le Coran, Bardésane et al-Muqanna', in: De Smet, D. & Amir-Moezzi, M. A. (ed.), *Esotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements*, Turnhout: Brepols, for instance p. 250–252 "Un dualisme modéré: Bardésane".

about his "moderate ḥanifism" (*al-ḥanīfiyya al-samḥa*): "My religion is white and pure" (*bayḍā wa niqayya*).[60] The Elchasaites in particular according to the Syriac author Theodor bar Koni called themselves the *ḥellē ḥewârē* (ܚܠܠܐ ܚܘܪܐ), the "white robes"[61], using exactly the same word *ḥewâr* as the term *ḥawārī* (حَوَارِي) for the Apostles in the Qur'ān! In other words: the Qur'ān is defining the companions or Apostles of Jesus, as well as Jesus himself, as followers of the same "white" religion as that of Elchasai and Mani.[62]

This is confirmed by an anonymous Shīʿī, Ismaʿilī, probably Fatimid, text that has been ascribed on questionable grounds by the editors Wilferd Madelung and Paul Walker to Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī and his brother. This text explicitly and unequivocally affirms that the Disciples of Jesus, the *ḥawāriyyūn*, were so called "on account of their white clothing" –

وإنما سمّوا الحواريون لبيض ثيابهم.[63]

It appears that we have still another incidental confirmation of our interpretation. Manfred Kropp cites a text from an Ethiopian homily about nine saint monks celebrating around a table – *mā'əd(d)ə*. The story is presented as taking place in the 5th century, but it was written down some time later and therefore only shortly before the beginnings of Islām. The text tells how the monks were regularly assembling around a table; on such an occasion a light came down on it "shining like the sun on them" and also angels descended and told them to depart on a missionary journey. Kropp believed that this text exudes a "Qur'ānic atmosphere";[64] and indeed, what is even more, it might also carry with it an Iranian, Manichaean background. The light descending on the altar reminds us about eternal beams of light that are shining and penetrating the material world.

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60 Gil, M (1992), 'The Creed of Abū 'Āmir', *Israel Oriental Studies* 12, pp. 22, 43 and our art. Van Reeth, 'Who is the 'other' Paraclete?, in: *The coming of the Comforter*, pp. 451-452; Van Reeth (2014), 'Les prophéties oraculaires dans le Coran et leurs antécédents: Montan et Mani, in: De Smet, D & Amir-Moezzi, MA (ed.), *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l'islam*, Paris: Le Cerf, pp. 109-113; Van Reeth (2016), 'La robe blanche des serviteurs de Dieu. 'Adī b. Zayd, le Coran, Bardésane et al-Muqanna', in: De Smet, D & Amir-Moezzi, MA (ed.), *L'Ésotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements*, Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 227, 252–262.

61 Scher, A, (1912), *Theodorus bar Koni, Liber Scholiorum 2* (CSCO 69 Subs. 26), Louvain: Peeters, p. 311, and our art. 'La robe blanche', p. 256.

62 Here we may refer to the function of the Table in the context of a Manichaean ceremony, as we argued already elsewhere (see *supra*, notes 21, 28, 30).

63 Madelung, W & Walker, PE (2021), *Affirming the Imamate. Early Fatimid teachings in the Islamic West. An Arabic critical edition and English translation of works attributed to Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Shīʿī and his brother Abu l-'Abbās*, London, p. 70 (Arabic text p. 62), with note 93: "Thus the author here can claim that this term indicates that Jesus's disciples were known as such because they wore white clothing. That then allows him to also equate them with the Mubayyida". – My attention to this source, which will still prove to be of exceptional significance for our investigation further on, was drawn by Daniel De Smet. I am very grateful for this important contribution to my argument.

64 Kropp, 'Beyond single words', p. 211.

The Table and the Virgin

Gabriel Reynolds rightly stressed that a correct interpretation should take into account a larger section of the Sura in which the Table, *mā'ida* (مَائِدَة), occurs, from verse 110 onwards to almost the end of the Sura. Thus verse 110 opens with God's words to Jesus about the descending of his Ghost on him:

إِذْ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ يَٰعِيسَى ٱبْنَ مَرْيَمَ ٱذْكُرْ نِعْمَتِى عَلَيْكَ وَعَلَىٰ وَٰلِدَتِكَ إِذْ أَيَّدتُّكَ بِرُوحِ ٱلْقُدُسِ

> "When Allah said: 'O Jesus, son of Mary, remember My goodness to you and to her who brought you forth, when I supported you by the Holy Spirit (….)'"

The context is the infancy of Jesus, when he is already prophesying in the cradle or on the flight to Egypt as a boy – an issue we will here not discuss any further.[65] What is attracting our attention here is the role of the divine Spirit. In the Gospel of Luke (1:35) on the occasion of the conception of Christ, he is approaching the Virgin Mary and overshadowing her – πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ δύναμις ὑψίστου ἐπισκιάσει σοι. However we understand this verse and especially the meaning of *the overshadowing* (ἐπισκιάσει),[66] it seems that the Qur'ān understands the role of the Holy Ghost differently, as in Q 21:91, where God says, He "breathed into her some of Our spirit (فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهَا مِن رُّوحِنَا فَرْجَهَا)," just as he did while creating Adam.[67]

Regardless if the divine *dynamis* and the Spirit of God from the Gospel text would be identical,[68] Hebrew רוח , Syriac ܪܘܚܐ and Arabic *rūḥ* (رُوح) are feminine words;[69] as Jessie Payne Margoliouth correctly notes, the word is only masculine "when used of the Holy Spirit".[70] The concept originally indicates "the vital principle (…); a subtle vaporous substance, which is the principle of vitality and of sensation and of voluntary motion" (Lane), not to be confused with the soul (*nafs*), which is the principle of identity and individuality. It is this vital principle, this "breath of life", that God while creating Adam according to Genesis 2:7 "breathed into his nostrils". A very similar presentation also appears in the Qur'ān (15:29 and 38:72).

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[65] See our article, Van Reeth (2017), 'Le *Vaticinans Puer* II: L'Enfant Jésus dans le Coran', pp. 393–404.

[66] See the analysis and considerations that are still worth reading by Norden, E (1924), *Die Geburt des Kindes: Geschichte einer religiösen Idee* (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg 3), Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, pp. 92–95, to compare with Schlatter, A (1947), *Die Evangelien nach Markus und Lukas*, Stuttgart: Calwer, p. 166.

[67] Azmoudeh, Kh, 'Esprit Saint', in: *Dictionnaire du Coran*, p. 278.

[68] Schmid, J (1960), *Das Evangelium nach Lukas,* Regensburg: Pustet, p. 43.

[69] See the insightful remark by Lagrange, MJ (1941[5]), *Évangile selon Saint Luc* (Études bibliques), Paris: J. Gabalda, p. 33, and for a very fine and complete definition of the concept the dictionary of Lane, EW (1867), *An Arabic-English Lexicon* 1.3, London-Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, p. 1180. See also Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 351.

[70] Payne Smith, R (1903), *A compendious Syriac dictionary*, Oxford: University Press, p. 533. See more minutely Payne Smith, R (1901), *Thesaurus Syriacus* 2, Oxford: University Press, pp. 3850–3851, and our art. 'Paraclete', p. 441.

All this helps to explain how in oriental, Syriac texts, the Holy Spirit is sometimes described as feminine.[71] In the Qur'ān it is not entirely clear what exactly is meant by the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit seems to be identified with the angel Gabriel, sometimes he seems identical with Jesus (as in Qur'ān 4:171).[72] This gives the impression – not so much of a kind of theological confusion or lack of clarity – but of the fact that behind the wordings of the Qur'ān there is a kind of Angel Christology.[73] As we have already demonstrated elsewhere, according to a certain Montanist and Manichaean tradition, Gabriel was "a form or appearance of the Lord himself", in such a way that this celestial archetype of Christ in the form of the angel was depicted as "a divine Archont who united himself to the 'goddess' Mary in order to conceive the Son of God".[74] In this particular incarnation theology, the Virgin Mary is deified so that the Holy Trinity consists of the Father, the Mother of Life identified with the Living Spirit and the Original (archetypical, pre-existent) Son of Man (*Bar Nâš*).[75]

This deification of the virgin Mary is exactly what we read about in the verse that immediately follows the text about the Table descending from heaven. There, the Qur'ān professes (verse 116 – translation Abdel Haleem):

> "When God says, 'Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God?' he will say, 'May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say'" –

a confession to which Jesus adds "You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You" – a phrase that could be a kind of a transposition of what he says according to the Gospel (John 17:21 – NIV): "… that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you," only to introduce and confirm in the Qur'ān a clear inferiority of Jesus. It reminds us in a certain sense of a form of Arianism.

Apparently, the Prophet rejected any kind of deification of the Virgin Mary.[76] According to Reynolds in his commentary, this statement has to be considered only as a "exagération délibérée", "une *reductio ad absurdum* de la vénération chrétienne de Marie"; Reynolds explicitly rejects, against Richard Bell, any link to Christian Arab sectarians, who deified Mary and who according to the *Panarion* of Epiphanius (m.

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71 Gallez, ÉM (2005), *Le Messie et son prophète. Aux origines de l'Islam* II. *Du Muhammad des Califes au Muhammad de l'histoire*, Versailles: Éditions de Paris, pp. 77, 80–81.

72 Azmoudeh, *Esprit Saint*, pp. 277–278; Cuypers, Le Festin, p. 327.

73 Corbin, H (1981), Le paradoxe du monothéisme, Paris: L'Herne, p. 113; Lüling, G (1981), Die Wiederentdeckung des Propheten Muhammad. Eine Kritik am „christlichen" Abendland, Erlangen: Verlagsbuchhandlung Hannelore, pp. 60-61, 236; and our art. Van Reeth (2010), 'Âges ou anges? L'arbre cosmique et les esprits qui gouvernent les champs de l'univers', in : Acta Orientalia Belgica, 23, p. 216; Van Reeth, 'Paraclete', p. 430–432.

74 Paraclete, p. 440.

75 Paraclete, p. 441.

76 Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', p. 95.

403) "faisaient des gâteaux (*kollurida*) dédiés à Marie",[77] for which reason they were called Kollyridians (Κολλυριδιανοί). As Epiphanius is our only source, some scholars doubted that those Kollyridians ever existed.[78] It should be noted however, if one takes into account that the *Protevangelium Jacobi* is to be considered the subtext of the Qur'ānic account of the birth of the virgin Mary (3:35–37),[79] that not only the conception of Jesus but also the conception of the Virgin was miraculous: according to the *Protevangelium*, at least in its original textform, she was conceived after her foster-father Joachim departed for the desert and before his return, at the precise moment when the angel pronounced the prophetic words "You shall conceive and give birth" – συνλήμψεις καὶ γεννήσεις, exactly as will happen to herself on the occasion of the angel's message (Luke 1:31; the wordings are similar). This is as far as the birth of the Virgin is concerned at least an excessive formulation of the immaculate conception: Émile de Strycker explains in detail how the perfect form in the phrase "your wife conceived" – ἡ γυνή σου Ἄννα ἐν γαστρὶ εἴληφεν – for something that happened during Joachim's absence, had posed a doctrinal problem to a number of ancient scribes, copyists and commentators who sometimes tried to change the text or to explain and discard it by way of all sorts of subterfuges; Epiphanius was even one of them.[80] No doubt that the *Protevangelium* seems to suggest that the child, Mary, was of divine origin, just as Jesus was. The step to the divinisation of Mary was therefore indeed not very far fetched.

When the Qur'ān explicitly states at the beginning of the passage (5:110), however, that it is God who addressed Mary (وَإِذْ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ), would it not be strange to put in his divine mouth some ironic and wry utterings? But even so and whatever that may be – is a form of mitigating of an otherwise unequivocal text, as proposed by Reynolds and others, really necessary and justified? It may be true, as Stephen Shoemaker has argued, that Epiphanius is often biased and exaggerating in his presentation of doctrines, as he seems all too eager to multiply almost endlessly the number of heresies;[81] it may even be true that Epiphanius does not very clearly state that the Kollyridians

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77 Bell, R (1991), *A commentary on the Qur'ān*, vol. 1, Manchester: University of Manchester, p. 174; Reynolds, *Sourate 5: al-mā'ida*, p. 232. Also Neuwirth, A & Selis, MA (2016), *Qur'anic studies today*, Abingdon: Routledge, p. 302, considered the verses of the sura of the table "a rhetorical statement". See also Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 351.

78 Cameron, A (2004), 'The cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious development and myth-making', in: Swanson, RN, *The Church and Mary* (Studies in Church History 39), Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, pp. 6–7 and very vehemently concerning the Qur'ānic text: Gallez, *Le Messie et son prophète*, pp. 75–77.

79 Reynolds, *Qur'ān and its Biblical subtext*, pp. 140, 144.

80 De Strycker, É (1961), *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques. Recherches sur le Papyrus Bodmer 5 avec une édition critique du texte et une traduction annotée* (Subsidia Hagiographica 33), Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, pp. 81–83, notes 1 and 3.

81 Shoemaker, S (2008), 'Epiphanius of Salamis, the Kollyridians, and the early Dormition narratives: The cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.3, pp. 372, 375, 399.

would have confessed Mary's divinity,[82] but he undoubtedly goes in that direction, when he imputed to these heretics that "they substituted the Virgin Mary to God (εἰς τὴν ὑπὲρ τῆς αὐτῆς ἁγίας ἀειπαρθένου ὑπόθεσιν ἀντὶ θεοῦ ταύτην παρεισάγειν)",[83] something he repeatedly returns to: "Mary is not God and does not have her body from heaven but by human conception" (οὔτε γὰρ θεὸς ἡ Μαρία οὔτε ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ ἔχουσα τὸ σῶμα, ἀλλ' ἐκ συλλήψεως ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικός)[84], he explicitly states, clearly reacting to what he thought to be the Kollyridian doctrine.

When we look again at the context in the Qur'ān, the aspect of the Table that Jesus made to descend from heaven, the *mā'ida* or Ethiopian *mā'əd(d)ə* consisting of a platform with a flat bread in the form of a pancake on it, exactly corresponds to what, according to Epiphanius, the worshippers of the Virgin offered to her: a κολλυρίς.[85] It corresponds even more to his description of the ceremony they executed: "For certain women decorate a barber's chair or a square seat, spread a cloth on it, set out bread and offer it in Mary's name on a certain day of the year, and all partake of the bread".[86]

Furthermore, Shoemaker brilliantly demonstrated how the presentation by Epiphanius of the Kollyridians resembled the description of the rituals that some female worshippers of the Virgin were performing according to the *Six-Books' Apocryphon of the Dormition of the Virgin*, a text of the 4th century, one of the oldest sources about the Dormition tradition.[87] According to this text, an altar was set up for the Virgin Mary whereby "the apostles ordered that any offering offered in the name of my Lady Mary should not remain overnight, but that at midnight of the night immediately preceding her commemoration, it should be kneaded and baked; and in the morning let it go up on the altar while the people stand before the altar".[88]

We already tried to argue some years ago that what was intended by the offering of the κολλυρίς was in fact the bread (τροφή) in form of a pancake that according to the *Protevangelium Jacobi* but also according to the description in the Qur'ān (3:32/37),[89]

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[82] Shoemaker, 'Epiphanius of Salamis', p. 378.

[83] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 78.23.3; Williams, F. (2013²), *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 79) Leiden: Brill, pp. 634–635.

[84] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 78.23.10, Williams, *Panarion* 635, and again *Panarion* 79.4.6, 79.7.2, 79.7.5, 79.7.7, Williams, *o.c.*, pp. 640, 643–644.

[85] The term occurs twice in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 78.23.4 and 79.9.3.

[86] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 79.1.7: τινὲς γὰρ γυναῖκες κουρικόν τινα κοσμοῦσαι ἤτοι δίφρον τετράγωνον, ἁπλώσασαι ἐπ' αὐτὸν ὀθόνην, ἐν ἡμέρᾳ τινὶ φανερᾷ τοῦ ἔτους ἄρτον προτιθέασι καὶ ἀναφέρουσιν εἰς ὄνομα τῆς Μαρίας, αἱ πᾶσαι δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄρτου μεταλαμβάνουσιν, cf. Shoemaker, 'Epiphanius of Salamis', p. 375.

[87] Shoemaker, 'Epiphanius of Salamis', pp. 375, 385–388, 397–398.

[88] Wright, W (1865), The Departure of my Lady Mary from this world, *The Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 6–7, p. 153, cited by Shoemaker, 'Epiphanius of Salamis', p. 387.

[89] In the Qur'ān (3:37) the τροφή of the *Protevangelium* 8.1 (De Strycker, *Protévangile de Jacques*, p. 101), is rendered by the word *rizq:* وَجَدَ عِندَهَا رِزْقًا; asked where it came from, she answers: "It is from Allah. Verily, Allah provides for anyone He wants without restriction" – هُوَ مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ. إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَآءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ , see Reynolds, *Qur'ān and its Biblical subtext*, pp. 136, 142–143; Goudarzi, 'Eucharist', p. 118.

the Virgin Mary when still a girl receives on countless Byzantine miniatures from an angel appearing to her from heaven.[90]

This interpretation is clearly confirmed by the anonymous Shī'ī text, cited above, in which the daughter of the Prophet Fāṭima is (as often) explicitly identified with Mary, the mother of Jesus: "Fāṭima (…) was the equal of Maryam. God selected her and purified her over the women of the two worlds, like Maryam (…). Then God said: 'God wants to drive impurity out of you, O people of the House, and to cleanse you by purifying' [Q 33:33].[91] The Apostle of God said, 'This verse was revealed about five of us, about me, about 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, so that I and my family may be those purified (…). God caused a table to descend from heaven to Fāṭima, just as he descended a table to Maryam, daughter of 'Imrān, on the day she entered her *miḥrāb* (…)[92]. At that, behold, there was by the side of the *miḥrāb* a plate of *tharīd*[93] and on it was meat (…). Fāṭima carried it and placed it in front of the Apostle of God (…). The prophet turned to it and ate (…). So he said (…): 'Whenever Zakariyā' came in to see her (= Maryam) in the *miḥrāb*, he found with her food; he said: "O Maryam, from where comes this to you"; she said: "It is from God, truly God provides food to whomever He wills without a reckoning." [Q 3: 37][94]

In the remarkable preceding verse in the Qur'ān (3:36), the mother of Mary expresses her astonishment after having given birth to a girl. This is immediately followed by a rather strange comment: "Allah knew quite well what she had been delivered of; the male is not like the female" – وَٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا وَضَعَتْ وَلَيْسَ ٱلذَّكَرُ كَٱلْأُنثَىٰ. What this might mean[95] becomes clear in the periphrastic reformulation of this phrase by Ibn Hishām: "The two were not the same when I vowed her to thee as a consecrated offer-

[90] Van Reeth, 'Les Collyridiennes', p. 151–152.

[91] See our comments about this much debated verse (with reference to scholarly studies) in *Coran des Historiens* 2.2, p. 1124.

[92] This *miḥrāb* is the room in which Mary used to live in the Temple of Jerusalem (see the verse Qur'ān 3:37 that the anonymous author is about to cite a few lines further, as we shall see, cf. already note 76 and Reynolds, *Qur'ān and its Biblical subtext*, pp. 142–143); in the *Protevangelium Jacobi* VII, 3.16, it is "the third degree of the Altar (ἐπὶ τρίτου βαθμοῦ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου)", a text that has been slightly toned down in the Syriac and Ethiopian versions, where *Altar* has been replaced by *Temple*, the version that the author of the Qur'ān may have had before him, see De Strycker, *Protévangile*, p. 101 + note 12. One may also think about the "sanctuary" that mother Anna made for her daughter Mary in her room as a child – ἐποίησεν ἁγίασμα ἐν τῷ κοιτῶνι αὐτῆς, De Strycker, *o.c.*, p. 90–91. All this was only to maintain her perfect purity, reason why her mother only gave her food that could not affect her purity, De Strycker, *ibidem*, p. 91 note 3.

[93] Madelung & Walker, *Affirming the Imamate*, p. 30 note 35: "a broth made from crumbled bread." More accurate seems the translation for ثريد (*tharīd*) in Wehr, H, *Arabic-English dictionary*, p. 102: "a dish of sopped bread, meat and broth", almost exactly what an Ethiopian meal is looking like!

[94] Madelung & Walker, *Affirming the Imamate*, pp. 29–30 (Arab text 15–16).

[95] For the traditional explanations for the astonishment of the mother, see Reynolds, *Qur'ān and its Biblical subtext*, pp. 134–135.

ing."[96] Indeed, there were Gnostics who believed that their mother-goddess was originally a celestial masculine power who was incarnated into a female form so that she could give birth to the *Logos*, the third Hypostasis of the Gnostic trinity. As she remained masculine in the guise of a lady goddess, salvation could only be obtained by freeing and restoring her fallen, hidden but original sexuality.[97]

It has to be such a doctrine that is behind the words of the Qur'ān, when Jesus denied to have said: "Take me and my mother as two gods apart from Allah." The Qur'ān, by citing these words of the prophet Jesus, refuted the older pre-Islamic Arabic doctrine about the divinity of Mary as it was professed by the Kollyridians.

We know rather well the milieu where such a doctrine originated. We already cited the old Montanist tradition about an Angel-Christology according to which an Angel or divine Archont united himself to the divine Mary in order to incarnate the Son of God in the docetic human form of Jesus. And indeed, Epiphanius reports that the doctrine about the divinity of Mary and the liturgy accompanying it was introduced in Arabia by women from Thrace and upper Scythia.[98] This is precisely the region where Montanism originated. A few lines further he states that the doctrine was taught by women like Quintilla, Maximilla and Priscilla,[99] that is to say the prophetesses who together with Montanus founded their heresy. Elsewhere, we tried to demonstrate the importance of Montanism for the formative period of Islam.[100]

Concluding remarks

The wordings of the Qur'ān when Jesus responds to the suspicions of God are not only – and perhaps not even so much – anti-Christian and anti-Trinitarian.[101] In the first place, they react against a Philomarianite confession about the Trinity as if the divinity would consist of Father, Mary and Jesus. The Kollyridians, while presenting their offerings on a flat bread by way of an altar to the virgin Mary, were probably commemorating the loaf brought by an angel from heaven to comfort her when she was living as a child in the Temple of Jerusalem. The context in the Qur'ān seems to imply that her servants linked this event to the Eucharist. In their mind, it was the same divine bread that Jesus gave to his apostles on the occasion of the Last Supper. Shoemaker has established that such a ceremony among the handmaids of the Virgin

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96 Translation: Guillaume, A (1955), *The Life of Muhammad. A translation of Ibn Isḥāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Oxford: University Press, p. 275. Reynolds, *Qur'ān and its Biblical subtext*, p. 141, also rightly refers to the words of Anna in the *Protevangelium Jacobi* 4.1 (Reynolds cites the translation of Cullmann): "if I bear a child, *whether male or female*, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God" – ἐὰν γεννήσω εἴτε ἄρσενα εἴτε θήλειαν …, De Strycker, *Protévangile de Jacques*, pp. 80–81.

97 Rudolph, K (1990[3]), *Die Gnosis. Wesen und Geschichte einer spätantiken Religion*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, p. 293; Van Reeth, 'Les Collyridiennes', p. 151.

98 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 78.23.4; 79.1.2.

99 Epiphanius, *Panarion* 79.1.7.

100 See our art. Van Reeth, 'Les prophéties oraculaires dans le Coran', pp. 98, 115–116, 119–125.

101 Reynolds, '*Mā'ida* passage', p. 95, cf. also Goudarzi, 'Eucharist', p. 126.

was held according to the *Six-Books' Apocryphon of the Dormition of the Virgin* three times during the year, "a feast of Mary two or three days after the Nativity (…), followed by a second on 15 May and a third on 13 August".[102]

We may suppose that the Kollyridians believed that the bread (κολλυρίδες) they offered to the Virgin in commemoration of her presence in the Temple of Jerusalem in the company of angels, was a kind of divine bread, identical or similar to the Eucharistic bread of the Lord's Supper, even if such a supposition can only be tentative. However it may be, the Qur'ānic text about the Table – *mā'ida* (مَائِدَة) – does not exclude nor contradict such an identification. The loaf of the *mā'ida* that Jesus descended among his companions was a celestial, divine or angelic kind of bread, just as the κολλυρίδες of the Kollyridians. The text of the *Six-Books' Apocryphon of the Dormition of the Virgin* cited by Shoemaker contains the words of blessing that the priest directed to the Theotókos (Θεοτόκος), in order that "my master Mary comes and blesses these offerings".[103]

The sacredness of the liturgy about the Table is not dismissed nor refuted by the Qur'ān.[104] What the Qur'ān does affirm is that one may not conclude that the virgin Mary, when partaking into the divine bread or blessing this bread during a religious ceremony, would be divine herself, a member of a divine trinity[105]. Jesus, according to the Qur'ān, unequivocally confirms it: There can be only one God.[106] The sacred bread derives its supernatural holiness from the one and unique God alone.

When considering the text of the Qur'ān with its subtexts, it is therefore not sufficient to limit our attention to the section about the Table only. Not only the Lord's Supper, linked symbolically to the miracle about the feeding the multitude and of the *manna* provided to Moses and the people of Israel in the desert, but also the angelic bread received by the Holy Virgin are an integral part of the Prophet's comments, as well as the accompanying statements of Jesus and his companions. According to the Qur'ān, there is not one single indication that would prove the divine status of the Messenger. Taken together in the Prophet's sermon, all the texts to which he refers testify to a principle of prophecy that is entirely transcendent and that is directing the actions of God's Servants. This principle, hidden in a corporal envelope, supernatural as it is, is never incarnated, so that its embodiment remains entirely human. This is why Jesus confessed according to the Qur'ān (5:116): "You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You."

Thus, it appears from the second part of our investigation that however closely the Qur'ān is imbedded in Biblical and post-Biblical, scriptural tradition, every cultural and interreligious encounter should respectfully recognise the differences in inter-

[102] Shoemaker, 'Epiphanius of Salamis', p. 387.

[103] Shoemaker, 'Epiphanius of Salamis' p. 388 n. 48.

[104] An argument for the liturgical aspect of the vision of the Table in the Qur'ān is also its "status as a returning (and so surely in some sense as a memorial) feast" ('Abd al-Tafāhum, 'The Qur'ān and the holy communion', p. 241).

[105] Cuypers, *Le Festin*, p. 352.

[106] Cf. Goudarzi, 'Eucharist', pp. 127-128, 130.

pretation and theological doctrine. Muslims, Christians and Jews maintain three different representations of one and the same Divinity. According to Theophylact Simocatta (4:11.2), already the Persian king Xusrō Parvēz wrote to the Byzantine Emperor Maurice that one may look at the world with two different eyes.[107]

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[107] Literally this beautiful letter stated: "God effected that the whole world should be illumined from the very beginning by two eyes" (δύο τισὶν ὀφθαλμοῖς τὸν κόσμον καταλύμπεσθαι πάντα ἄνωθεν καὶ ἐξ ἀρχῆς τὸ Θεῖον ἐπραγματεύσατο), cf. Maksymiuk, K (2018), 'The Two Eyes of the Earth: The Problem of Respect in Sasanid-Roman Relations', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 58, p. 594.

Bridging text and thought: historical, literary and cognitive approaches in Biblical and Qur'ānic studies

Peter Derie

Abstract

This article explores the interdisciplinary potential of Qur'ānic studies by integrating cognitive, literary, and historical approaches, mirroring methodological shifts in Biblical studies. It argues that cognitive linguistics offers a crucial lens for analyzing the Qur'ān's linguistic structures, conceptual frameworks, and metaphorical language thereby enriching traditional exegetical methods. By applying insights from distinct scholars such as Cuypers, Decharneux, and Chabbi, the study additionally highlights how embodied cognition, sensory-motor schemas, and conceptual categorization shape Qur'ānic discourse. The analysis underscores the fluid and interpretive nature of language challenging historically rigid readings of sacred texts. Offering a forward-looking perspective, this article advocates for an integrative model that bridges historical-critical, literary, and cognitive methodologies positioning Qur'ānic studies within a broader scholarly dialogue on the hybrid nature of religious texts.

Keywords

Qur'ān, Exegesis, Methodology, Historical-critical approach, Source criticism, Cognitive Linguistics

1. Introduction to methodological diversity and Qurānic text

For centuries, Qur'ānic studies have been shaped by historical and theological interpretations, yet the linguistic mechanisms underlying its discourse remain an underexplored frontier. What happens when we apply cognitive science to the study of sacred texts? How do embodied metaphors, sensory-motor schemas, and conceptual categorization shape the Qur'ān's theological and literary dimensions? These questions drive a new, interdisciplinary turn in Qur'ānic studies integrating cognitive linguistics with established historical and literary methodologies.

In 2019, Qur'ānic scholar Angelika Neuwirth highlighted an urgent need for Qur'ānic studies to be placed on equal footing with Biblical scholarship. She called for an approach that treats the Qur'ān not as an isolated or exotic text but as a literary and historical document open to the same rigorous analysis applied to the Bible.[1] This

[1] Neuwirth, A (2019), *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity. A Shared Heritage*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 12; Cf. Segovia, C (2019) 'John Wansbrough and the Problem of Islamic Origins

appeal aligns with a broader shift in contemporary theology and religious studies where sacred texts are increasingly examined through interdisciplinary frameworks that combine historical, literary, and cognitive methodologies.

Biblical studies underwent a similar evolution. The 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* reaffirmed that, despite their theological significance, Biblical texts should be analyzed using general principles of textual interpretation.[2] This was in line with an evolution that had already been initiated in the 18th and 19th centuries by (Protestant) biblical scholars who believed that biblical texts, despite their special value, should be interpreted according to the same general methods of textual exegesis, which in time called into question the literalist views of the Old and New Testaments.

This recognition emerged amid an era of methodological expansion which saw the rise of structuralism, feminist exegesis, and reception theory. Likewise, Qur'ānic studies are now witnessing a diversification of methodologies, shifting from an exclusive reliance on historical narratives and theological traditions to approaches that focus on the text itself.

This article situates itself within this evolving scholarly landscape arguing for a multidisciplinary model that incorporates cognitive linguistics into Qur'ānic studies as a powerful tool for analyzing the Qur'ān's linguistic structures, conceptual frameworks, and metaphorical language, offering insights into its meaning-making processes.[3]

Rather than treating the Qur'ān as an isolated masterpiece beyond historical and linguistic inquiry, as how the Qur'ān "should be", this article embraces its hybrid nature as a text shaped by and shaping the intellectual and religious milieu of late antiquity.[4] It highlights how Qur'ānic studies can benefit from the same methodological openness that has enriched Biblical scholarship, fostering a more dynamic and comprehensive engagement with the text.

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in Recent Scholarship. A Farewell to the Traditional Account' in id. (ed.) (2019), *The Coming of the Comforter: When, Where, and to Whom?*, Piscataway (NJ): Gorgias Press, pp. xix–xxviii, p. xx: "To put it briefly: the historical-critical method successfully applied in the past two centuries to the study of early Judaism and nascent Christianity has almost gone unparalleled in the study of Islamic origins, which does represent an anomaly of very significant proportions, therefore, within the field of comparative religious studies. Yet only very few scholars seem to be aware of this and even a more reduced number of scholars working on the field of early Islamic studies can be said to care much of such an astonishing asymmetry."

2 Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993), *Interpretatie van de Bijbel in de Kerk*, viewed 4 Sept 2024,(https://rkdocumenten.nl/toondocument/2510-interpretatie-van-de-bijbel-in-de-kerk-nl/).

3 Ibid., cf. n° 53: Filosofische vormen van hermeneutiek.

4 Cf. Berg, H (1997), 'The implications of, and opposition to, the methods and theories of John Wansbrough', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 3–22, p. 6.

2. Cycles of insight: the historical-critical comeback

A key methodological convergence emerges in the work of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), founder of the "Newer Document Hypothesis", who argued, among other things, that the Pentateuch is composed of distinct sources or documents.

Though Wellhausen is often portrayed as a dry historian who analyzed texts down to their smallest components, he was passionate about the feasts of the early Hebrews with their raucous rituals, and hated the priests who had afterwards 'spoiled the fun', in which the religious had completely detached itself from everyday life.[5] His comparative approach led him to examine pre-Islamic Arab culture, which he considered a lens through which to understand the vital Hebrew folklife, before it had been cut up as history by the post-exilic priesthood.[6] He made a transition from the Hebrew Bible to the colourful, what he himself calls "wild" Arab world.[7]

Wellhausen chose to translate the Arabic chronicles and organize them chronologically to uncover 'the original sources', meticulously explaining historically how the original cult became distorted over the generations, particularly after Islām developed into a state-like structure[8]. His work as an Arabist mirrored the approach of biblical scholars of the time: historical-critical exegesis, source criticism, text reconstruction and questioning authorship[9].

In the 19th century, a dynamic emerged in which other scholars classified Qur'ānic verses chronologically using linguistic criteria such as the evolution of style, verse length, and word choices. A classic example is Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930) who arranged chapters chronologically while still relying on the prophet's later biographical narratives.[10]

Just as Biblical scholarship moved beyond Wellhausen's synthesis in the 1970s, with figures like Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Heinrich Schmid introducing more com-

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5 Cf. Rudolph, K (1983), 'Wellhausen as an Arabist', *Semeia*, vol. 25, pp. 111–155.

6 Cf. Irwin, R (2006), *For Lust of Knowing. The Orientalists and their Ennemies*, Londen: Allen Lane, 2006, p. 186; Cf. J.K.W. Vatke (1806-1882) who distinguishes between natural, ethical and cultic religion.

7 "Den Uebergang vom Alten Testament zu den Arabern habe ich gemacht in der Absicht, den Wildling kennen zu lernen, auf den von Priestern und Propheten das Reis der Thora Jahve's gepfropft ist. (…) Der Islam ist also der richtige Eingang nicht bloss für das, was vor ihm, sondern auch für das, was hinter ihm liegt." Wellhausen, J. (1882/2018), *Muhammed in Medina. Das ist Vakidi's Kitab alMaghazi in verkürzter deutscher Wiedergabe*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, Vorbemerkungen, viewed 17 July 2023 (https://doi-org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.1515/9783111550169).

8 Cf. Rudolph (1983), p. 114–115.

9 Cf. Rudolph (1983), p. 111.

10 Cf. Dye, G (2019), 'Le corpus coranique. Contexte et composition', Amir-Moëzzi, M & Dye, G (ed.) (2019), *Le Coran des historiens*, Vol. 1, Paris: Editions du Cerf, pp. 735–846, p. 745; Nöldeke, T (2005), *Geschichte des Qorâns*. n.p.: Elibron classics.

plex models of Pentateuchal formation, Qur'ānic studies also began reassessing its foundational assumptions.[11]

For a long time, reliance on Nöldeke's model came with the implicit recognition that, without later historical narratives, the genesis of the Qur'ān remained largely elusive. Traditional accounts, shaped by salvation history, intertwine historical reporting with theological imperatives underpinning the theological choices that the new religion had to make within the context of a newly established world empire.[12]

By the late 1970s, however, hypercritical approaches questioned these classical reconstructions. As one scholar remarked, "As the record of Muslim revelation, the book requires no introduction. As a document susceptible to Biblical-style criticism, the Qur'ān is virtually unknown".[13] Nearly forty years later, Mehdi Azaiez echoed a similar conclusion, noting the continued absence of a rigorous critical edition of the Qur'ān[14].

Influenced by Bultmann's demythologizing approach in Bible studies, a conceptual distinction gradually emerged between Muhammad (as he is lived in the Islāmic faith), the prophetic voices we hear in the Qur'ānic text, and the historical prophet of the primordial community.[15] In Bible studies, this seems like a normal, acquired thought exercise – it is, however, an approach still gaining traction in Arabic studies.

Embracing methodological diversity in the study of sacred texts invites scholars to transcend traditional boundaries. This methodological shift raises crucial questions: Who was the initial audience? Were they primarily monotheistic insiders rather than 'pagans'? How did editors shape the final text? Is the Qur'ān structured as a canon, a codex, or an evolving oral text? These inquiries, familiar in Biblical studies, highlight the growing overlap in research methodologies between the two fields.

Recent decades have seen a revitalization of Qur'ānic studies marked by the Arabic translation of Nöldeke's work, advances in corpus linguistics, epigraphy, and palaeography, and groundbreaking intertextual research. These culminated in the 2019 publication of *Le Coran des historiens*, a landmark French-language reference integrating classical philology with new religious-historical insights to establish a critical

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[11] „Die Pentateuchforschung, einst Prunkstück der kritischen Exegese, ist zusehends in eine tiefe Krise geraten." in: Zenger, E (1982), ‚Auf der Suche nach einem Weg aus der Pentateuchkrise', *Theologische Revue*, vol. 78, pp. 353–362, p. 353.

[12] « Les études coraniques devraient donc suivre l'exemple des études néotestamentaires: que penserait-on d'une analyse de la composition des Évangiles qui prendrait pour point de départ, ou pour principale source d'information, le témoignage de Papias de Hiérapolis (v. 70–163 apr. J.-C.) au lieu de partir d'un examen des textes eux-mêmes (...) C'est pourtant une telle méthodologie qui informe nombre d'études sur l'histoire du Coran, en donnant la priorité à des témoignages tardifs (…) », Dye (2019), p. 755.

[13] Wansbrough, J (1977/2004), *Quranic Studies. Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. xxi.

[14] « Un constat s'impose: il n'existe toujours pas d'édition critique du Coran qui satisfasse aux exigences d'une philologie rigoureuse », Azaiez, M. (2015), *Le contre-discours coranique* (Studies in the History and Culture of the Middle East), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015.

[15] For the reference to Bultmann, cf. Berg (1977), p. 7.

Qur'ānology. As Angelika Neuwirth notes, the challenge today is to embrace methodological plurality in studying the Qur'ān – the third monotheistic scripture – to deepen our historical and literary understanding.[16]

3. A literary turn: Semitic rhetoric

Like any evolving discipline, Qur'ānic studies require methodological adaptation. One such approach is called Semitic rhetoric. For proper understanding it is good to read this translation first:[17]

1 The Compassionate
2 taught the Quran;
3 created man;
4 taught him speech.
5 The sun and the moon are upon a reckonin
6 And the stars and the trees prostrate.
7 Heaven He has raised and the Balance He has set,
8 that you transgress not in the balance.
9 So set right the weight and fall not short in the balance.
10 The earth has He laid dowan for creatures.
11 Therin are fruit and date palms bearing sheaths,
12 husked grains and fragrant herbs.
13 So which of your Lord's boons do you two deny?
14 He created man from dried clay, like earthen vessels,
15 and He created jinn from smokeless fire. 16 So which (…)
17 Lord of the two easts and Lord of the two wests. 18 So which (…)
19 He mixed the two seas, such that they meet one another.
20 Between them lies a barrier that they transgress not. 21 So which (…)
22 From them come forth pearls and coral stones. 23 So which (…)
24 His are the ships towering aloft upon the see like standards 25 So which (…)

[16] « Il donne aussi à sentir qu'une science nouvelle, la coranologie, atteint enfin sa maturité et produit ce document fondamental pour les développements ultérieurs de ladite science (…) », C.B. (2021), Review of Le Coran des historiens, *Bulletin critique des Annales islamologiques*, vol. 35 (2021), viewed 23 April 2023 (http://journals.openedition.org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/bcai/320). Other reference works (not exhaustive): Amir-Moëzzi, M (ed.) (2007), *Dictionnaire du Coran*, Paris: Robert Laffont; Mcauliffe, J (ed.) (2006), *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Rippin, A (ed.) (2006), *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, Oxford: Blackwell; Mcauliffe, J (ed.) (2001–2006), *Encyclopaedia of the Quran*, Leiden: Brill; Neuenkirchen, P (2019), *Le Coran Des Historiens. Bibliographie des études sur le Coran,* (Vol. 3), Paris: Editions Du Cerf; Neuwirth, A (2010), *Der Koran als Text der Spätantike. Ein europäischer Zugang*, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2010; Ibid., *Der Koran: Band 1: Frühmekkanische Suren*, Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011.

[17] Q 55:1–25; Nasr, S (ed.) (2015), *The Study Quran. A new translation and commentary*, New York: Harper Collins, p. 1310–1313.

The praise of creation and the cosmos in this passage may evoke associations with Psalm 136, yet it unfolds within the Qur'ān's unique linguistic framework. The short, rhythmic verses, structured by a consistent rhyme scheme and refrain, reflect a literary cohesion reminiscent of Biblical form criticism, which examines textual structures to reveal rhetorical strategies.[18] Can this method deepen our understanding of the Qur'ān? Possibly it can. To explore this, we follow Michel Cuypers' structural approach in our reading of verse 6.

A Belgian literary scholar and brother of Charles de Foucauld, Cuypers was awarded Iran's 2009 prize for the best religious book for his groundbreaking Qur'ānic reading framework. He builds on the Semitic rhetoric model developed by Roland Meynet, a Catholic theologian.[19] Meynet's work gained recognition in 1993 when the Bible Commission acknowledged a Biblical literary tradition, which he broadened into "Semitic compositional processes" –patterns also found in extra-biblical Semitic texts, such as those in Ugaritic. Cuypers extends this perspective to the Qur'ān arguing that its ancient Semitic structuring principles differ from the Greek rhetorical tradition that later influenced Islāmic exegesis. According to him, post-Qur'ānic interpreters, already shaped by Greek models, overlooked the Qur'ān's intricate textual architecture leading to modern misreading's of its composition.[20]

To be specific, it is the idea that in ancient Semitic cultures, themes do not follow each other in a progressive linear but fit together at a distance, in a complex set of symmetries. For such mirror structures, Cuypers uses fixed terms. The piece we just read is the first 'party' of sura 55 which is divided into three 'sous-parties', with numbers 1 and 3 being symmetrically structured (1–12/14–24), connected by a small part.

We will now have a closer look at the first 'sous-partie'. This contains two 'morceaux' (1–6/7–12). The first one is divided into 2 'segments' (verses 1–4 and 5–6).

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[18] Cuypers, M (2002–2003), 'La Sourate 55 (al-Raḥmān) et le Psautier', *Luqmān*, vol. 37, pp. 1–20, p. 2, viewed 2 April 2023, (https://www.academia.edu/36041559/La_Sourate_55); Cf. El-Badawi & Pregill, M (2016) in Azaiz, M & Reynolds, G & Tesei, T et al., *The Qur'an Seminar Commentary. Le Qur'an Seminar. A Collaborative Study of 50 Qur'anic Passages. Commentaire collaboratif de 50 passages coraniques*, Berlin – Boston, p. 381.

[19] Cuypers, M (2011), 'Semitic Rhetoric as a Key to the Question of the nazm of the Qur'anic Text', *Journal of Qur'anic* Studies, vol. 13/1 (2011), pp. 1–24, p. 3, viewed 13 July 2023, (https://www-jstor-org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/stable/41352831); Meynet, R (1989), *L'Analyse rhétorique. Une nouvelle méthode pour comprendre la Bible. Textes fondateurs et exposé systématique*, Paris: Editions du Cerf; Meynet, R et al. (1998), *Rhétorique sémitique. Textes de la Bible et de la Tradition musulmane*, Paris: Editions du Cerf; Meynet, R (1998), *Rhetorical Analysis. An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. Antecedents: Robert Lowth (1753), Johann Albrecht Bengel (1752).

[20] Amir-Moezzi, M (2007), 'Préface', Cuypers, M (2007), *Le Festin. Une lecture de la sourate al-mâ'ida*, Paris: Lethielleux, I–IV, p. II; Cuypers, M (2005), 'La rhétorique sémitique dans le Coran. La sourate 1, al-Fātiḥa, et la sourate 96, al-'Alaq', *Studia Rhetorica Biblica et Semitica,* vol. 20, pp. 1–20, p. 2, viewed 1 July 2023 (https://www.retoricabiblicaesemitica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20.stRBS_Cuypers_12.07.2016.pdf).

Cuypers distinguishes types of text organization in such divisions: parallelism (ABC/A'B'C') when text units in a semantic relationship return in the same order, concentric organization around a center (ABC/X/C'B'A'), and a centerless mirroring (ABC/C'B'A').

For example, the first four verses, or the first segment, consists of three members. A member is a linear sequence of related language elements – a syntagma. The members are arranged in ABA order:[21]

morceau 1	segment 1	member 1	_ 1,2	The compassionate	taught	the Quran	A
		member 2	_ 3		created	man	B
		member 3	_ 4		taught him	**speech**	**A'**
	segment 2	member 1	= 5	The sun	and the moon	are upon a reckoning	
		member 2	= 6	The (???)	and the trees	Prosternate	

"A" refers to the Qur'ān, "B" to the creation of man, and "A" to "the exposition".[22] This word relates symmetrically to 'the Qur'ān' (in "A") for both terms are located at the end of the extreme members of the segment and are direct complements of an identical verbum: "he taught". From his criticism of form, Cuypers therefore understands "the exposition" as synonymous with "the Qur'ān".

Cuypers then distinguishes a second segment (verses 5–6) which expresses God's rule and sovereignty over nature in two paragraphs. In verse 5, He arranges the cosmos; in verse 6, nature bows before Him.

But who exactly is kneeling or bowing in verse 6? The term *al-najm* is traditionally translated as "star" or collectively as "stars" aligning with the preceding mention of the sun and moon. Michel Cuypers offers a different reading, however, interpreting *al-najm* as "herbal plant". This creates a homogeneous pair with "tree" mirroring the previous parallelism between celestial bodies. Thus, Cuypers suggests it is the plant world that bows before God.

Some commentators alternatively derive *najm* as a gerund (*maṣdar*) of the verb *najama* (to rise or emerge) reinforcing the semantic link to plant growth.[23] In Dutch, "het gewas" could replace "herbal plant" preserving both the sense of emergence and its parallel with *shajar* (also collective for "trees" / "geboomte"). This case illustrates how reading frameworks shape interpretation – they do not just identify structure but also produce it.

[21] Cuypers (2002-2003), p. 2–3.

[22] Cuypers translates al-bayân as "l'exposée".

[23] Cuypers (2002-2003), p. 3.

Form criticism can deepen textual understanding, yet Cuypers' strict structuring raises critical questions: did the editors intend such intricate literary patterns, or is this a retrospective imposition? Moreover, does his approach risk methodological rigidity, even implicit scientism, where rhetorical analysis becomes the sole lens for understanding the text?

Ultimately, Cuypers' method positions the Qur'ān as a canon – a cohesive literary entity rather than a fragmented compilation. However, as in Biblical scholarship, caution is needed: attributing excessive complexity to ancient texts can obscure rather than illuminate their meaning.[24]

4. Source criticism and the Syriac turn

While Cuypers' synchronic approach provides insight into the Qur'ān's structure, source criticism, which steps outside the final text, remains valuable. Within Surah 55, Cuypers identifies three chiasm-based segments, yet finds verses 8–9 problematic.[25] These introduce a sudden shift from cosmic creation to fair trade laws, disrupting the rhythm and the content.[26] To resolve this, Cuypers maps parallel cosmic realities – sun/moon, sky/earth, humans/living beings, palm trees/trees, aromatic plants/herbs – leading him to interpret the balance (*mīzān*) metaphorically as the Qur'ān itself.[27] If we omit the commercial verses, two two-part segments emerge: the first corresponding to the creation of heaven and earth, and the second segment (verses 11–12) explaining verse 10. He suggests the trade-related verses may be a later editorial addition initially understood figuratively but later read literally.[28]

[24] Cf. Sinai, N (2017), 'Review Essay. Going Round in Circles', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, vol. 19, pp. 108–124.

[25] Cuypers (2002/2003), p. 3. We follow the verse arrangement of Cuypers.

[26] Cuypers (2002/2003), p. 4; Dye (2019), p. 816.

[27] Cuypers (2002/2003), p. 5. « Le v. 9 pourrait donc être une interpolation rédactionnelle placée là en raison du terme ‹ la balance ›, interprété de manière littérale dans la rédaction finale du texte, alors que le sens originel était vraisemblablement métaphorique: avec le Livre, Dieu fait connaître aux hommes la juste mesure et la vérité de toutes choses, et avant tout des actes humains. La balance serait en somme une propriété du Coran ou une conséquence de sa révélation, presque un synonyme. », Cuypers (2002–2003), p. 5.

[28] Cuypers (2002–2003), p. 3. We follow the verse arrangement of Cuypers.

morceau 2	segment 1	member 1	+[7]	THE HEAVEN	He has raised		
		member 2	+[8]		and He has set	the balance.	*chiasm*
	segment 2	member 1	–[9a]	that you transgress not in		the balance	A (positive)
		member 2	—b	so set the weight		right,	B (positive)
			-c	and fall not short in		the balance.	A' (negative)
	segment 3	member 1	=[10]	THE EARTH	has He laid down	for creatures;	A
		member 2	=[11]	Therein, are fruit		and date palms bearing sheaths	B
		member 3	=[12]	husked grains		and fragrant herbs.	B' *(chiasm)*

This solution, however, is debated. Arthur Droge notes that elsewhere the balance symbolizes divine justice, while Guillaume Dye argues that a different verbum is used in this case, and that the Qur'ān never presents it cosmologically. Additionally, the rhyme scheme breaks exposing textual tensions.[29] Despite this, Cuypers' method highlights editorial gaps demonstrating that synchronic and diachronic analysis can coexist. If we consider the Qur'ān as an open codex, studying individual fragments within their historical religious context becomes essential.

This leads to source criticism, familiar from Biblical studies, offering alternative insights. Belgian researcher Julien Decharneux situates the Qur'ān within the Syriac school of thought, which views it as drawing on late-antique literary motifs from Christian poet-theologians.[30] These motifs are derived from antiphonal compositions, whose style is fundamentally distinct from that of the philosopher-theologians of the Greek churches and the jurist-theologians of the Latin churches. Such texts were homiletic and meant to inspire reflection – an approach shared with the Qur'ān.[31] Islāmic exegetes have also traditionally examined and commented on Syriac in the Qur'ān, calling it suryānī or nabaṭī.

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[29] More about the scholarly debate in Dye (2019), p. 816.

[30] Decharneux, J (2023), *Creation and Contemplation. The Cosmology of the Qur'ān and Its Late Antique Background,* Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter.

[31] El-Badawi, E (2015), Syriac and the Qur'ān, Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān, viewed 2 July 2023, (http://dx.doi.org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.1163/1875–3922_); Griffith, S. (2014), *The Bible in Arabic,* Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, p. 18; Neuwirth, A. (2014), *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community. Reading the Qur'an as a literary Text*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. xxi.

The comparative approach has roots in 19th-century Biblical studies. Assyriologist George Smith discovered that Genesis paralleled ancient Near Eastern myths disproving its presumed uniqueness and revealing a shared mythological or even cultural framework.

Within this tradition, Decharneux examines Narsai of Nisibis (d. 502) and Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), renowned poets of the Assyrian Church. In a commentary on Genesis, where God commands a partition between the waters so that the waters above 'remain suspended', the firmament is conceptualized as a cosmic balance.[32] In this view, the firmament divides the primordial reservoir – one part for heaven, one for earthly realm where water sustains life. This concept of a balanced partition aligns with Qur'ānic imagery fitting between verse 7 (heaven) and verse 10 (earth). By exploring a different repertoire, Decharneux can shed light on a cosmological question as the Qur'ānic text itself does not offer a detailed account of the origins of the objects in the cosmos.[33]

Applying this perspective, Decharneux suggests that verses 8–9 were later interpolations by an author who misunderstood the balance as a trade-related term rather than a creation metaphor. Seeking to preserve rhyme, he repeated mīzān at the verse's end, drawing from Qur'ānic passages on commerce (6:152; 11:85).

In summary, Decharneux identifies two layers of authorship: (1) a Syriac-influenced poet, who composed the Surah within the Biblical milieu, (2) a later editor, who interpolated verses from other Qur'ānic passages.

This again highlights an informational gap in the genesis of the final text (cf. Cuypers) and underscores the textual complexity of the Qur'ān's formation[34]. Current research into intertextual connections – as seen in Joseph Witztum's argument that Hebrew patriarchal stories entered the Qur'ān via Christian post-Biblical traditions – demonstrates the value of Biblical methodologies in Qur'ānic studies.[35]

Yet, caution is needed. Just as Biblical scholarship challenges simplistic origin theories, the Syriac hypothesis assumes widespread bilingualism which the Qur'ānic text does not confirm. Linguistic parallels do not always imply direct knowledge. While etymology illustrates transformation processes, it cannot alone determine textual origins – direct material evidence remains crucial.[36]

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[32] Decharneux (2023), p. 5–31.

[33] Decharneux (2023), p. 172.

[34] Decharneux (2023), p. 206 & 209; Dye (2019), p. 822.

[35] Witztum, J (2009), 'The foundations of the house (Q 2:127)', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 72 (1), pp. 25–40.

[36] Cf. Neuwirth, A (2009), 'Imagining Mary. Disputing Jesus. Reading Sûrat Maryam and related Meccan texts within the Qur'ânic communication process', Jokisch, B, Rebstock, U, Conrad, L (ed.) (2009), *Fremde, Feinde und Kurioses: Innen- und Aussenansichten unseres muslimischen Nachbarn*, Berlin – New York: De Gruyter, pp. 383–416, p. 416; Zadeh, T (2015), 'Quranic Studies and the Literary Turn', *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* pp. 329–342; p. 334, viewed 2 March 2023, (https://go-gale-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&u=leuven&id=GALE%7CA429089515&v=2.1&it=r); Rippin, A (2007), 'Syriac in the Qur'ân', REYNOLDS, G (2007), *The Qur'ân it Its Historical Context*, pp. 249–261, pp. 205 & 258.

Several scholars, including Decharneux, warn against linear models of influence preferring to view Qur'ānic discourse as eclectic and free-flowing which can engage discontinuously with various traditions of late antiquity.[37] The Qur'ān, for example, depicts earth's creation before heaven, whereas Syriac literature reverses this order. Rather than plagiarism, the Qur'ān reflects a distinct voice engaging with the literary traditions of Yemen, Eastern Arabia, and Southern Syria.

5. But where are the voices? Chabbi, human presence, and the Qur'ānic 'Sitz im Leben'

But who are these voices? Syriac-based approaches, in emphasizing intertextual connections, risk overlooking historical context and lived realities. This brings us to Hermann Gunkel (1862 – 1932) who focused not on separating sources but on oral transmission within socio-religious contexts (*Formgeschichte*). He argued that Genesis' sagas originated from nomadic storytelling shaped by real-life conditions.

Gunkel's concept of *Sitz im Leben* highlights the reciprocal relationship between religious texts and their societies – texts do not fall like manna from the sky or like rain in the desert: there is a reciprocal relationship between religious texts and the society in which they originated. The Qur'ān presents itself as communication, yet who speaks and who listens? This functional question connects historical anthropology and cognitive linguistics as critical tools for Qur'ānic studies.

In 2019, Jacqueline Chabbi demonstrated how the Biblical Adam was adapted in the Qur'ān to reflect 7th-century Arabian survival dynamics. Rather than mythologizing the first human being, the Qur'ān focuses on leadership and resilience in an environment of scarcity where individuals depended on collective structures.[38] Chabbi challenges classical Islāmic hermeneutics which, she argues, retroactively shaped imperial-era theological readings disconnecting them from the Qur'ān's original desert context. At the same time, she rejects efforts to situate the Qur'ān's textual history too broadly within Late Antiquity.[39]

Using historical anthropology, Chabbi reconstructs lexical meanings tied to survival. A key example is Surah 16:120 where Abraham is described as *'ummātān qānītan li-llāhi*. The use of the term *Ummah* here is unusual as it typically means "community". An intertextual reading links *Ummah* to Genesis 18:18, portraying Abraham as the ancestor of a great nation (or community) suggesting that Abraham is to become a great and powerful people through whom all nations will be blessed.

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37 Cf. Decharneux (2023), p. 211.

38 Chabbi, J (2019), *On a perdu Adam. La création dans le coran*, Paris: Le Seuil.

39 Chabbi, J (1997/2010), *Le Seigneur des tribus. L'Islam de Mahomet,* Paris: Éditions CNRS, p. 149; Chabbi, J (2021), 'La représentation de la pluralité des mondes dans l'Arabie du 7em siècle (Les mots du Coran)', *YouTube (1/10/2021),* viewed 24 November 2021, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkGLRtDjWq0&list =PLf9ZZcwpDyZ2bQtGXYDEzG_7-WqTAMpF8&index=5.

Mette B. Mortensen translates this verse as: Abraham being "a community that obeyed God" thereby affirming Abraham's foundational role. Mortensen concludes, "This translation is convincing".[40]

Chabbi vehemently opposes this: "Absolutely not! Abraham is not a community, but a good guide." She links *Ummah* with the word *Imām* ("one who goes before, who leads") reflecting the vital dependence on a leader in the closed world of the Arabian desert where every move was fraught with danger and life depended on "the guide". Only later, in an imperial context, *Ummah* took on a political meaning as "well guided community".[41]

Meanwhile, Old Testament studies have grown skeptical about distinguishing oral traditions from written sources. Similarly, Chabbi's Bedouin thesis faces criticism for rigidly excluding Late Antiquity's cultural influences. While desert imagery is common in pre-Islāmic poetry, it does not dominate Qur'ānic discourse. Furthermore, can a loosely structured tribal society truly transition into a monarchical state or is this simply a foundational myth?

The core takeaway remains: for the first Arab audience, the ur-Qur'ān was understood through the mental categories of its time. Its verses present themselves as signs, urging reflection –implying that human thought must engage with them.

6. Humans do listen – cognitive linguistics bridging mind and sacred text

6.1. Introduction

Viewing the Qur'ān as a text open to mental exploration, I apply cognitive linguistics to deepen this understanding. Cognitive linguistics (CL) is a discipline now integrated in Biblical hermeneutics through neuroscience and literary studies which investigates how language functions mentally.[42] This approach is relatively new to Islāmic

[40] Mortensen, B (2019), 'Sourate 16 al-nahl (les abeilles)', Moezzi-Dye (2019), Vol. 2 (2019), p. 648.

[41] Cf. Chabbi, J (2021), 'Oumma, Les mots du Coran', *YouTube (12/11/2018),* viewed 24 November 202*1, (*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=os1oFYNAjUw); Derie, P (2023), 'Jacqueline Chabbi et le Coran des historiens. Jouer tous ensemble sur le même terrain ?', Azaiez, M (ed.) (2023), *Le Coran: de la tribu à l'empire: autour de l'oeuvre de Jacqueline Chabbi,* Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain, pp 69-81.

[42] Such as (non-exhaustive) Aaron, D (2001), *Biblical Ambiguities. Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery*, Leiden: Brill; Boeve, L & Feyaerts, K (ed.) (1999), *Metaphors and God-Talk*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1999; Descamp, MTh & Sweetser, E (2005), 'Metaphors for God: Why and How Do Our Choices Matter for Humans? The Application of Contemporary Cognitive Linguistics Research to the Debate on God and Metaphor', *Pastoral Psychology,* vol. 53/3, pp. 207–238; Feyaerts, K (ed.) (2003), *The Bible Through Metaphor and Translation. A Cognitive Semantic Perspective*, Bern: Peter Lang; Sweetser, E (2012), *Viewpoint and Perspective in Language and Gesture: Cognitive Linguistics Approaches,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.; Van Wolde, E (2003), *Job 28. Cognition in Context*, Leiden: Brill; Van Hecke, P (ed.) (2005), *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, Leuven: Leuven University Press; Van Hecke, P (2011), *From Linguistics to*

studies with very few publications available on the subject[43]. I will discuss some principles of this approach based on the work of Mark Johnson, a leading figure in the field, and use selected verses from the Qur'ān to illustrate these principles.[44]

First, I address Johnson's critique of Chomsky, among others, coming from analytic philosophy. Chomsky situates thought and mental phenomena in an independent *cogito* considering syntactic structures and language as innate universal characteristics. He views language through a disembodied Cartesian model existing in a mind-independent world where language functions as a formal system composed of meaningless symbols.[45] Johnson, by contrast, grounds language in patterns of neural activity ("mapping") that emerge from the bodily interaction of our organism with the physical and socio-cultural environment. According to Johnson, there are no distinct brain regions dedicated to unbounded cognition floating in an eternal, transcendental, mental ether. Instead, all cognitive networks are connected to our fundamental sensory or motor systems. Neuroscience does not identify a central consciousness center – akin to a cockpit controlling thought – but instead reveals massive parallel processes that are loosely coordinated and experienced as moments of consciousness.[46]

Johnson, therefore, locates concepts not in the mind but in the world as ongoing processes through which the organism gains experiences and develops habits of action. Our thought structures are embodied routines whereas a linguistic concept is

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Hermeneutics: A Functional and Cognitive Approach to Job 12–14, Leiden: Brill; Van Hecke, P & Human, D (ed.) (2010), *Metaphor in the Psalms,* Leuven: Peeters.

43 Cf. Christiansen, J (2015), 'The Dark Koran: A Semantic Analysis of the Koranic Darknesses (ẓulumāt) and their Metaphorical Usage', *Arabica*, pp. 185–233. p. 187. Apart from Christiansen, only a few studies are available, very recent and mainly from Iran. In the Journal of Qur'ānic Studies, only one article (since 1999) answers search terms referring to cognitive metaphor research and in it, Thomas Hoffmann also confirms the "sporadic and tentative" pioneering work on the subject, cf. Hoffmann, T (2019), 'Taste My Punishment and My Warnings (Q. 54:39). On the Torments of Tantalus and Other Painful Metaphors of Taste in the Qur'an', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies,* vol. 21 /1, pp. 1–20, viewed 22 February 2023, (https://web-s-ebscohost-com.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/ehost/search/advanced?vid=13&sid=be7471b0-cab1-4da1-b40e-5233a6b95205%40redis) & Hoffmann, T. (2009), 'Force Dynamics and the Qur'ân. An Essay in Cognitive Qur'ânic Poetics', Sabbath, R. (ed.) (2009), *Sacred Tropes. Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, pp. 65–76. There are, however, some disparate strictly literary metaphor studies.

44 Johnson, M (2017), *Embodied Mind, Meaning, and Reason. How our bodies give rise to understanding*, Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press; Johnson, M (1987), *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press; Johnson, M (2005), 'The philosophical significance of image schemas', Hampe, B (ed.) (2005), *From Perception to Meaning. Image Schemas (Cognitive Linguistics 29)*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 15–34.

45 Cf. Johnson (2017), pp. 1–3, 12–13, 43.

46 Edelman, G, Tononi, G (2000), *A Universe of Conscience. How Matter becomes Imagination*, New York: Basic Books, 2000, cited in Johnson (2017), p. 56.; Johnson, M, The Meaning, p. 87–90; Johnson (2017), p. 12, 24, 51; Tucker, D (2007), *Mind from Body. Experience from Neural Structure*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

merely a neural simulation that activates the same sensory and motor brain regions, much like the physical act of throwing a ball.[47]

Building on this, Johnson, along with linguist George Lakoff, has developed several principles since the 1980s. Notably, their work highlights that body-based meaning enables thought processes and abstract conceptualization. I apply a simple example to Chabbi's interpretation of the word الجنّة (*al-jannatu*). In Islāmic theology, *al-jannah* refers to the heavenly garden where believers are rewarded. It is characterized by greenery, abundant fruit, vines, springs, ample food, silk garments, shaded couches, and a climate without extremes of heat or cold.[48]

From a source-critical perspective, as seen in the work of Arthur Jeffery, *jannah* is proposed as a loanword from Syriac meaning an enclosed garden with pavilions and kiosks. Chabbi, however, traces the word back to the verb جَنَّ (*janna*), which she interprets as "covered in foliage, shielded from the sun by deep shade". At the time, *janna* would have evoked the physical experience of comfort, starkly contrasting with the harsh desert conditions: a place of rest under tall trees, away from the burning sun, a refuge from *nār*, the fiery desert heat, a term that the Qur'ān uses to signify hellfire.[49]

Understood through the logic of embodiment – rooted in a human organism's development within a specific, predefined environment and continuously interacting with it – the original semantic field of *janna* encompasses meanings like shade, coolness, nourishment, water, and rest. This source domain is cognitively projected onto the abstract, religious concept of "the next world" promised to "those who have followed God's path". Through metonymy, humans exert cognitive influence over their environment identifying themselves as religious subjects fulfilling the purposes of creation.

It is worth noting that the reverse process is also possible: an abstract derivation from Syriac could concretely feed back into the physical reality familiar to the Arabic speaker providing further specificity.[50]

In any case, *jannah* is more than a literary construct; it requires a different categorization. The religious concept reflects a cognitive adaptation by the language user to their physical environment and demands social and cultural robustness for such a

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47 Johnson (2017), p. 45.

48 Qur'ān 2:25; 2:177; 3:15.133.136.195.198; 6:32; 9:72; 13:23.35; 15:47; 16:61; 18:31; 19:96; 22:23; 23:86; 25:75; 69:21; 56:10–40; 55:46–78; 52:20–22; 47:15; 43:71; 42:22; 41:12; 39:20; 37:44–47; 36:34–35.56; 35:33; 34:37; 29:58 .88:8–16; 83:23.27.35; 76:12–25.

49 Chabbi, J (2018), 'Janna (Les mots du Coran)', *YouTube (9/11/2018),* viewed 26 November 2021, (https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=PmEnwy9grYg); Chabbi, J. (2020), 'Nur (Les mots du Coran)', *YouTube (28/10/2020*), viewed 24 November 2021, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1wj9bpUkrg).

50 Cf. Yri, K (1995), *My Father Taught Me How to Cry, but Now I Have Forgotten. The Semantics of Religious Concepts with an Emphasis on Meaning, Interpretation, and Translatability*, Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo, p. 15: "Although in the literature there is a general agreement that metaphorical extension generally takes place from concrete to abstract domains, the opposite development cannot be excluded as a possibility, and the hypothesis will be taken to be supported if examples can be found."

conceptual framework to reach its full expression. Theologically speaking, foundational religious concepts, as well as the language of the Qur'ān, have a pre-linguistic basis in human nature. Faith concepts simulate and participate in the process by which people in a given culture form a community – much like a ritual.

This integrated view of body and language can be summarized by the phrase "embodied mind", a simple yet profound term coined by Mark Johnson that captures a complex fundamental theme. I will elucidate some key principles, such as primary metaphors, domains, mappings, image schemata, complex metaphors, and prototypes, applying them to the term *baṣīr* and other variations of the root *baṣura*, which appears 148 times in the Qur'ān in 14 forms. The root refers to sensory perception, particularly vision.[51]

6.2. Primary metaphors

First, we explore the concept of primary metaphors. For instance, the metaphor MORE IS UP illustrates a deep-rooted, unconscious association between our understanding of quantity and vertical position. Another example, CAUSES ARE PHYSICAL FORCES, shows how we perceive abstract causal relationships as if they were physical interactions between objects even though no direct physical interaction exists. Similarly, when we talk about time (e.g., "we are nearing the end"), we mentally simulate a motor action.[52]

Seeing is associated with understanding. Johnson lists the entities, properties and relations of the source domain (seeing) as in the table below. We apply his perspective on the Qur'ānic term بصر (*baṣar*) in the right-hand column.[53]

[51] 'ب/ص/ر b–ṣ–r', in Badawi, E & Haleem, M (ed.) (2013), *Dictionary of Qur'anic Usage*, Leiden: Brill, viewed 15 April 2023, (http://dx.doi.org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.1163/1875-3922_dqu_SIM_000208); open source project, *Quranic Arabic Corpus,* viewed 13 September 2024, (https://corpus.quran.com/qurandictionary.jsp?q=bSr); Blachère, R (ed.) (1967), *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français-Anglais,* vol. 1, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, p. 643.

[52] Johnson (2017), p. 15–16.

[53] Johnson (2017), p. 14–15.

	source domain (according to Johnson)	maps to target domain	Qur'ān
بصر	an object seen	an idea or concept understood	6,104: "the eyes of the heart" described as an arriving object 19,38: how well they will see the final judgement → to understand the path to follow 51,21: who sees a sign in himself 2,96.110.233.237.265;3,15.20.156;5,71;8,72;11,112; 20,25; 33.9; 34,11; 41,40; 48,24; 57,4; 60,3: to see through the act (moral qualification)
	shedding light	"illuminating" an idea	28,72: to see/understand the alternation day and night as a proof of God
	seeing an object	understanding an idea	7,195: as feet walk, hands grasp and eyes see 27,54: Lot's of people do it anyway, "though they see" → (a)moral choice 32,27: seeing natural phenomena as signs 24,44: seeing night and day is a lesson
	visual acuity	intellectual "vision, insight"	10,43; 11,24: in opposition to blindness 12,96: Joseph's shirt makes Jacob see again (demonstrates his knowledge to his sons) 7,179: hearts with which they do not understand, eyes wherefore they do not see 32,10: leads to 'virtue' 3,13; 59,2: leads to 'a lesson' 32,9; 67,23: vision leads to 'thanks'

Notably, these abstract mental processes arise through sensory-motor experiences facilitated by neural connections between the source and target domains of the metaphor.

Cognitive linguistics identifies a range of primary metaphors such as UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING which is explained through developmental psychology. In the early stages of development, a child uses perceptual terms purely within the source domain (e.g., "I see"). Visual attention is established through prelinguistic eye contact – a universal phenomenon, as seen in suspenseful moments in films. At a later stage, both source and target domains become active simultaneously as in the phrase "See, mummy is home" where the child associates visual perception with language. Eventually, expressions like "I see what you mean" show no actual visual experience, the concepts of seeing and knowing become intertwined. Nonetheless, the neural pathways associated with visual input are activated.[54]

The Qur'ān uses this human competence as demonstrated in the verse (76:2): "We created man from a drop, a mixed fluid, to test him, and We made him hearing and seeing." Here, human vision is depicted as an intrinsic part of the created order. This concept of human seeing is not merely observational. As indicated in Lane's classical

[54] Johnson (2017), p. 114.

dictionary, it refers to active, testable mental perception. Seeing is associated with understanding such as comprehending a clear proof, achieving ultimate understanding on the Day of Judgment, to understand the path to follow, discerning the inner reality of a divine sign behind a natural phenomenon, or morally assessing an observed action.

In Surah 12:96, when Jacob regains his sight, the verse connects the attributes of a believer to the act of seeing: understanding, gratitude, virtue, the ability to recognize the signs of God, conviction in God's presence, understanding lessons, and looking forward to 'the balance' of the end times. The language in these verses evokes imagery that extends beyond mere physical sight, as summarized in 51:20-21: "Upon the earth are signs for those possessing certainty, and within your souls. Do you not then behold (= see) (أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ)?"

This "seeing" from the source domain aligns with the belief in the target domain that a believer must make conscious choices. The Qur'ān expects an immediate, reflective response from the reader at the mention of the word بصر (*baṣar*). A compelling example is found in Kazimirsky's dictionary which, for form II, includes the phrase "se dit des petits animaux" (said of small animals). This "seeing" can be likened to a cub opening its eyes, experiencing the world as it is given, and responding to stimuli through neural processes.[55]

6.3. Image schemata

A second fundamental concept is that of image schemas: simple, pre-reflective building blocks that play a crucial role in structuring our experience. Examples of image schemas include up/down, left/right, embeddedness, and balance. These patterns develop as our neural process grows and we continuously interact with the physical world shaping our abstract concepts.[56] For instance, the idea of "shadowy explanations" can be placed within the image schema of light/dark.[57]

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[55] De Biberstein Kazimirsky, A (1860), *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français,* vol. 1, Beyroet: Librairie du Liban, p. 131.

[56] Johnson, M (2017), pp. 21, 76–81, 100–109.

[57] Johnson, M (2005), 'The philosophical significance of image schemas', Hampe, B (ed.) (2005), *From Perception to Meaning. Image Schemas*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 15–34; Johnson, M (2017), p. 103 & p. 126; Lakoff, G (1987), *Women, Fire and dangerous things. What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press; Cienki, A (1997), 'Some Properties and Groupings of Image Schemas', Verspoor, M et al. (ed.) (1997), *Lexical and Syntactical Constructions and the Constructions of Meaning*, pp. 3–15, Amsterdam: John Benjamins; Cienki, A (1998), 'Metaphoric Gestures and Some of Their Relations to Verbal Metaphoric Expressions', Koenig, J (1998), *Discourse and Cognition. Bridging the Gap*, Stanford CA: CSLI Publications, pp. 189-204.

We continue to explore this visual schema from an intercultural perspective using the term بصر (*baṣar*).[58] The ability to see and not see is a fundamental action performed continuously by our organism and forms a natural basis for survival. The schema suggests that bright areas attract attention and are perceived as positive and pleasant while darkness is negatively associated with uncertainty.

In the Qur'ānic term بصر (*baṣar*), the movement from darkness to light symbolizes the transition from ignorance to knowledge but also conveys ideas such as infidelity and deceit. This contrasts with submission to God which brings social rights and protection but, if God's will dictates, can be withdrawn from the hypocrites causing them to fall back into darkness.[59] Surah 2,20 says: "The lightning all but snatches away their sight. Whenever it shines for them, they walk therein, and when darkness comes over them, they halt. Had God willed, He would have taken their hearing and their sight. Truly God is Powerful over all things." Thus, a sighted person is one who believes in God, in the Last Day and in the Messenger, and whose belief is instilled by God.

A related scheme is the focus point which describes how our eye lenses focus on specific objects to assess a situation. The object of focus becomes the figure while everything else fades into the background. Leonard Talmy describes the figure/ground or object/context distinction as a cognitive schema that helps us construct meaning from raw experience.[60]

An example of this in the Qur'ān is found in Surah 67:3–4, which uses twice the term بصر "Who created seven heavens one upon another; no disproportion dost thou see in the Merciful's creation. Cast thy sight again; dost thou see any flaw? Then cast thy sight twice again; the sight will return to thee humbled and wearied." In these verses, the initial focus is on the perfection of creation (figure), using instructive language to draw attention to this idea. In the following sentence, the focus shifts subtly to the awareness of human imperfection though it remains less emphasized than the perfection of creation. In the final sentence, human awareness of imperfection metaphorically causes one's eyes to turn downward, suggesting humility. The emphasis on God's perfection remains the central focal point while the schema activates our mental representation of the concept of 'creation'.

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[58] "Ellen Dodge and George Lakoff conclude that, although all languages do not have the same spatial-relations concepts, nevertheless, they appear to build their particular spatial relations from 'a limited inventory of basic primitive image schemas and frames of reference'" Johnson, M, o.c., p. 22.

[59] Qur'ān 2:20; 6:50; 11:20–24; 13:16; 35:19.

[60] Talmy, L (2000), *Toward a Cognitive Semantics*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, pp. 177–254.

6.4. Interferences

Metaphors also use sensory inference to perform abstract conceptualization. The biological foundation for this consists of the distinction between body schema and body image. We are aware of what we see (body image) but are not consciously aware of how we see (body schema). The processes within our body typically remain hidden to provide a seamless experience of the world, becoming noticeable only when a disruption occurs.

This bodily process is powerfully conceptualized in Surah 6,46: "How do you see it: were God to take away your hearing and your sight and seals your hearts, what god other than God would restore them unto you? Behold (= see), how We alternate the signs." Here, interference in the visual domain (source domain) is equated with interference in the target domain – namely, the inability to comprehend a transcendental idea. In the Qur'ān, downcast eyes or closed senses signify mental incapacity. Strikingly, this verse uses three different verbs to express seeing or looking, which brings out the deeper meaning of بصر as sight.[61]

The Qur'ān expresses skepticism towards the human body schema as it is limited and cannot perceive God directly as stated in verse 6:103: "Sight comprehends Him not, but He comprehends all sight (الأبصار)." This concept of an 'object that blocks vision' represents the distance between human perception and abstract descriptions of the divine. Conversely, the object that blocks vision can also be removed. An intriguing example is found in verse 75:14: "Yes, surely, man will be a testimony against himself (…)" Translated as "clear proof" or 'testimony", but in Arabic it reads بصيرة (*basīrah*). This implies that the body schema will be exposed meaning self-awareness can no longer remain hidden – human mechanics will testify against itself. Exposing the body schema conceptualizes abstract ideas about human status at the eschaton leading to true knowledge as depicted in Surah 50:22: "Now We have removed from you your cover; so today your sight is piercing." At death, the senses are lifted allowing the soul to grasp one's own condition and the perceive ultimate reality.

Other examples illustrate this concept such as the eyes being rigid or misty-eyed. In any case, the body schema, a principle from Shaun Gallagher's cognitive linguistics, functions within the anthropology of the Qur'ān as a metaphorical plaything of divine parameter. This is evident in verse 6:110: "And we will turn over their hearts and their eyes, just as they also did not believe the first time." This verse conceptualizes, through a basic sensorimotor experience – and cinematically to vision turning like eyeballs – how human understanding is dependent on a transcendent power.

[61] قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ سَمْعَكُمْ وَأَبْصَارَكُمْ وَخَتَمَ عَلَى قُلُوبِكُم مَّنْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُم بِهِ ۗ انظُرْ كَيْفَ نُصَرِّفُ الْآيَاتِ ثُمَّ هُمْ يَصْدِفُونَ

	source domain	maps to target domain	Qur'an
بصر	object blocks sight	understanding barrier	36,9; 45,23: a barrier, a veil 36,66; 6,46: to deprive sight 2,7; 16,108: sealing of senses 2,20: to deprive senses 15,15: clouded eyes 20,125: blindness after death as punishment (ethically incompetent man) 79,9: downcast eyes 24,43: flash of lightning 47,23: deaf and blinded 67,3: detection of imperfection 75,3: blinding 10,43: without guidance 43,51: false arguments of Pharaoh 6,103: hindrance by nature 14:42: eschatology (the gazes stiffen)
	blocking object removed	insight	50,22: at death the covering is taken off (the senses?) → seeing the reality of creation 41,20: 'sight' bears witness against man at the judgment and sinful status is thus revealed

6.5. Al-basīr: a metaphorical construction of the Qurān's God

Meanwhile, we have explored the term *baṣīr* through basic cognitive principles applied to the human organism. In several instances, however, the God of the Qur'ān names Himself *Al- baṣīr* (20.35: إِنَّكَ كُنْتَ بِنَا بَصِيرًا ("You see through us"). Here, *Al-baṣīr* refers to God's omniscience – His knowledge of everything: past, present, future, as well as people's thoughts and actions. The word Al-baṣīr helps cognitively structure the abstract concept of God. But how does the object of that divine gaze (i.e., the human being) translate its effect?

In 1966, philosopher Hans Jonas argued that our mental structure is shaped by our senses with the eye acting as the primary perceptual organ. From our ability to track images simultaneously, the notion of eternity emerged, and from our experience of instantaneous visual information, the concept of objectivity developed. In the age of social media, humans now experience vision as a panopticon, a mechanism of power in which the subject is disciplined into an object, as Michel Foucault describes. From the inputs of both philosophers, the semantic field linked to seeing includes notions such as impersonality, continuity, analytical and principled observation, neutrality, independence, factuality, distance, emotionlessness.

What else can we say about the Qur'ānic God when he calls Himself *Al-baṣīr*? We can connect this to the classic CATEGORIES ARE CONTAINERS scheme from cognitive linguistics. This schema suggests that we understand conceptual categories as receptacles into which we place experiences that share common characteristics. Enclosure is a fundamental experience of our organism as we constantly grasp objects

and remove them from their enclosures. Categories are created through metaphorical representation organizing and distinguishing abstract concepts, as seen in Surah 11:112 "So be steadfast, as thou hast been commanded – and those who turn in repentance along with you – and be not rebellious. Truly He sees whatsoever you do." Herein, the 'container' represents the set of rules and social regulations by which a believing subject should live under the watchful eye of *Al-baṣīr*.

Even our body itself can be considered a 'container'. Hence the recurrent powerful phrase in the Qur'ān as in 2:265 "And God does see through whatever you do", as though God is inspecting the contents of this container. People's behaviour constitutes the 'filling material' and according to this behaviour, God, as an expert, bestows what He wills, as in Surah 42:27 "But He sends down whatsoever He will according to a measure. Verily of His servants He is Aware, Seeing".

In other words, our organic ability to see conceptualizes a divine intervention and the 'letting down' of what is necessary. Strikingly, Kazimirsky also translates the term بصيرة (*baṣīrah*) as "caretaker".

Can cognitive linguistics provide insight here? We can explore this by connecting three verses where God is depicted as a comforter, a helper through natural elements, and a protector. In each case, *Al-baṣīr* acts as the connective focal point. In Surah 18, we can also encounter God's attentiveness with the form أَبْصِرْ (*'abṣir*).

primaire metaphor	vers	Context with surrounding verses	description	complexe metaphor
بصير	17:96: God suffices as a Witness between you and me. Verily, of His servants He is Aware, Seeing.	to see = to comfort	God is like an all-seeing eye, fathoming the deepest secrets of the universe and seeing all layers of reality, both overt and hidden, reaching beyond the physical world, penetrating thoughts and emotions; and with that knowledge sustaining creation and helping, protecting and comforting creatures.	God is a lens of care God is a refuge
	22:61: That is because God makes the night pass into the day and makes the day pass into the night, and because God is Hearing, Seeing.	seeing = having the power to help		
	40:56: Therefore seek refuge in God. Truly He is the Hearer, the Seer.	to see = God who can distinguish between followers and the others, offering protection to the one who follows the signs		

In the right-hand column, we thus arrive at a complex metaphor. In cognitive linguistics, this is a mental construct that integrates multiple metaphorical elements into a coherent whole to convey a more layered meaning. In this case, *Al-baṣīr* represents an

aspect of the abstract god concept as a sharp-eyed protector who provides for everything. In contemporary terms, this can be understood as a safe haven. This idea is reinforced by verse 10:31: قُلْ مَن يَرْزُقُكُم مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَمَّن يَمْلِكُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَمَن يُخْرِجُ الْحَيَّ مِنَ الْمَيِّتِ وَيُخْرِجُ الْمَيِّتَ مِنَ الْحَيِّ وَمَن يُدَبِّرُ الْأَمْرَ ("Say: 'Who provides for your sustenance from the heavens and the earth? Or who rules over hearing and seeing? And who makes the living arise from the dead, and makes the dead arise from the living?'"). Thus, we break away from the semantic fields of Jonas and Foucault.

6.6. Prototype-periphery

In cognitive linguistics, categories are often understood in terms of family resemblances, a concept introduced by Wittgenstein and further developed within the field. This means that members of a category share overlapping characteristics rather than being defined by a single, rigid feature. For instance, the category of 'seeing' can encompass both the literal act of vision and metaphorical meanings such as 'insight', 'understanding', 'enlightment', 'comprehension'. This aligns with cognitive linguistics' emphasis on how language reflects human cognition, in which conceptual categories are based on usage patterns rather than strict definitions.

The concept of a 'prototype' refers to a central, typical example that helps us understand other members of the semantic category and organizes our knowledge about them. The 'periphery' refers to less typical elements within the category such as 'caring', which can be seen as a more specific extension of the prototype of 'seeing'. This type of 'seeing' also involves taking concrete actions to ensure that a situation is well managed. 'Caring' may imply an aspect of understanding, but it exists in a slightly different region of the lexical field, encompassing terms like empathy, responsibility, diligence, and giving importance. All members reflect an aspect of the term بصر (*baṣar*).

Cognitive linguistics recognizes that such extensions are natural, and that categories can expand to include diverse meanings based on context and human, organic, bodily experience. This perspective, which highlights the flexible nature of semantic categories, contrasts with more traditional, prescriptive approaches where meanings are assumed to be static, rigid, historically objective readings that aim to establish a single, definitive meaning – in contrast to the more confessing or apologetic approaches (e.g., "The Qur'ān says that…").

7. Conclusion. Why is religious language so effective for some people?

This question intrigues us all. Distinct scholars like Cuypers, Decharneux, and Chabbi have each illuminated the semantic richness of the Qur'ān. This study demonstrated how cognitive linguistics can enhance our understanding of its linguistic structure offering an alternative by emphasizing the fluid and interpretive nature of language.

Of course, this approach presents challenges about a 7th-century text and the need for greater consensus on the cultural and intellectual milieu of revelation. How were

ideas shared among different communities in historical Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia, and along the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula? And what role did the religious concepts of the primordial community play in shaping these exchanges?

Rather than displacing the historical-critical method, this study highlights the need for methodological integration as seen in Biblical studies. The Qur'ān, as a hybrid text, benefits from a holistic model that bridges historical, literary, and cognitive approaches. This interdisciplinary trust is crucial for advancing Qur'ānic scholarship.

Even leading scholars recognize this potential. Mohammed Amir-Moëzzi, a proponent of historical-critical research (diachronic), was invited to write the foreword for a publication by Michel Cuypers who employs a synchronic methodology. Amir-Moëzzi candidly acknowledges: "I do not yet know exactly how, but I am sure that the two approaches can complement and refine each other, and that they can create a decisive, original breakthrough for a new exegesis of this great enigma that remains the Qur'ān."[62] Similarly, Angelika Neuwirth calls for a linking model that unites disciplines traditionally kept apart[63].

In embracing methodological plurality, Qur'ānic studies can move beyond disciplinary silos, fostering a dynamic and comprehensive approach to this enigmatic text.

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[63] Neuwirth, A (2019), p. 18.

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The opposite of strength. Christian-Islāmic dialogue as a prototype of religious adult education

Mathias Kissel

Abstract

Whenever political agendas let people find themselves in a dilemma, it makes sense to look back, not in order to imitate history, but to learn from it. This is one of the crucial tasks of adult formation especially, in our case, Christian adult formation. But many if not most Christians find themselves today in a situation, in which their faith is one of a number of faiths, which, in most cases, try and live harmoniously under one cultural roof. Christian adult formation therefore has primarily to focus on this 'polyphony', which may be a challenge as well as an enrichment. Dogmatically speaking: This is one of the key moments, where Christian adult formation is not solely information about certain facts, but is in itself a place where theological insight emanates, in other words, a locus theologicus. In order to establish the significance of pertinent adult formation ('prototype') and its main character ('the opposite of strength') the text brings into dialogue a group of authors who are concerned with certain aspects of religious formation, two authors who argue from a standpoint, which I'd like to describe as historical, insofar as they both are weaving a net: of historical intertwined with dogmatical questions (Felix Körner), of cultural intertwined with ethical aspects (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), both connected by the thread of the Pauline phrase: It is sown in weakness (1 Cor 15:43).

Keywords

Adult formation, Christian-Islāmic dialogue, hermeneutics

Introduction

«... und vergibt ihnen beiden.»

(D. Bonhoeffer, *Christen und Heiden*)[1]

The following pages depict a particular and, in my view, crucial aspect of adult Christian formation, and they do it in the form of a triptych:[2] The two outer panels create a frame for consideration which explores the importance of adult education in general, and more specifically adult Christian education in our day and age; the central panel sets out to explore the relevance of Christian-Islamic dialogue as a prototype of adult Christian formation from a very specific angle.

I would like to start by demonstrating one key aspect of what I currently consider to be extremely important in the field of adult formation by revitalizing an approach which is actually not new at all but refers to deeper roots of adult formation.

Having done that, I shall go to great length in discussing a concrete example of adult Christian formation. And as we, in formation and education, always discern between intended and unintended, between formal and informal learning, I am emphasizing right here that the example I will be showing is precisely not an intentional, directed, or a controlled learning but exactly one that happens by chance, one which is inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable. We are therefore encountering an educational process that is still somewhat underexposed in research and which is therefore particularly close to my heart.

The third panel of the triptych, the closing chapter, places this example in a larger context by considering not only the possible impact of adult formation on 'Christianity after modernity'[3] but also the sheer necessity of this impact.

Taking into account the overlapping meaning and significance of the three terms 'adult formation', 'adult religious formation', and 'adult Christian formation', I shall use them not quite synonymously but rather indiscriminately.

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1 *God visits all people when they call,*
with His bread he satisfies body and soul,
for Christians and Gentiles dies the death of the cross
and forgives them both.
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christians and Pagans. Poem*, 8th July 1944, transl. M.K.)

2 It is a poignant coincidence that one of the compositions about Dietrich Bonhoeffer bears the title 'Bonhoeffer Triptychon' Berlinski, H & Zimmermann, HW & Helmschrott, RM (1992), *Bonhoeffer Triptychon. Oratorio,* Premiere New York. (Commissioned by Union Theological Seminary, New York).

3 Cf. Lee, RLM & Ackerman, SE (Ed.) (2018), *The Challenge of Religion after Modernity. Beyond Disenchantment*, 2nd edn, London et al.

1. What 'is' religious adult formation?

In order to give a rough idea of the direction in which I'm going, I would like to preface this first panel with a quotation that speaks to me in a specific manner. It is to be found in the monumental opus by Bernd Schröder, which attempts to outline all aspects of religious education, and reads:

> "An as yet unrealized potential especially of adult church education appears to lie in participation in ecumenical and interreligious relations. Adult protestant formation can provide with special – not to say unique – experiences that are difficult to access in other church settings. Participation in ecumenical and interreligious relations owns educational power as such – even if the respective encounter is not specifically designed as a learning process."[4]

In this quote, we encounter the *leitmotifs* we will hear again and again in what lies ahead: ecumenism, interreligious encounter, and what we call a 'place of theology' or, in scholastic terminology, *locus theologicus*.

1.1. Lifelong

At first, it seems necessary to draw our attention to the fact that adult religious formation is by no means a new concept at all – and neither is it a concept which is based on voluntary participation. Theoretically this is, of course, the case. In practice, however, adult religious formation – like any form of education – is a lifelong necessity, something which is expressed in a nutshell in the slogan of 'lifelong learning'.

In Judaism, for example, learning – not mere 'reading' – the Torah is compulsory for all adult Jews.[5] A striking example or, for this matter, a prototype of adult formation, we already encounter in the Hebrew Bible in the well-known episode remembered by the prophet Nehemiah, in which the 'whole Scripture' is read aloud in the face of 'all the people' – quite literally: the text states the presence of all "men and women" (8:2–3).

In the quest for adult formation, we do indeed encounter the epitome of Jewish upbringing: It consists of a lifelong study of Torah as a text, which gradually takes shape in written form throughout history, and then also further develops in the form of an oral Torah. It is in this notion that Wolfgang Müller-Commichau observes: "For Judaism, learning is a lifelong process; it cannot be terminated by any examination or certificate; in this respect, the distinction between youth and adult education is more of an academic construction."[6]

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4 Schröder, B (2021), *Religionspädagogik*, 2nd edn, Tübingen, p. 327. [All translations: M.K.]

5 Demsky, A & al. (2007), 'Education', 'Jewish', in: Skolnik, F & Berenbaum, M (Ed.) (2007), *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Bd. VI, 2nd edn, Farmington Hill, p. 162–214. – Cf. Crenshaw, JL (1998), *Education in ancient Israel. Across the deadening silence*, New York.

6 Müller-Commichau, W (2010), 'Jüdische Erwachsenenbildung', Arnold, R & Nolda, S & Nuissl, E (Ed.), *Wörterbuch Erwachsenenbildung,* 2nd edn, Bad Heilbrunn, p. 168.

1.2. Survival

This proves even more true if we look at history: The survival of Judaism – as well as the emergence and spread of Christianity – would be entirely inconceivable without what we today call adult education.

Karl Ernst Nipkow describes religious education as an 'ongoing accompaniment to life and renewal': We are never ever 'finished', neither with ourselves, nor with our 'fellow human beings', nor 'with God' – we are always 'on a journey'.[7] Religious education is part of the construction of our identity, and it is not merely a cognitive but also an emotional 'reflection'. The term 'construction of identity' proves therefore significant: Adulthood is not a static state at all, rather it is a dynamic process.

In Lutheran terms, one can even open up a wider dimension in asserting that adult religious formation overcomes the *curvatum in se*: it is a form of service to the world. In doing so, however, we become aware of something which I would like to call 'paradoxical reciprocity': We can only attain identity through dialogue with the world – but at the same time, conversely, dialogue with the world is only possible on the basis of a successful identity.

Onto such a dialogue, a very characteristic dialogue indeed, I would now like to take a closer look, because, I believe, it does not only have consequences for the *individual* identity of the person, but because it has consequences for the identity of Christianity as such: What I am thinking of here is the Christian-Islamic dialogue.

2. Testimony in Weakness

2.1. Introduction

Whenever political agendas let people find themselves in a dilemma, it makes sense to look back, not in order to imitate history but to learn from it. We shall see what I mean by learning; first, however, we will have a look into what history enables us to discover.

The Middle East (as well as the Iberian Peninsula) has, in earlier centuries, seen a quite natural and peaceful coexistence between members of what we now call (not quite accurately) Abrahamic religions.[8] Conflicts occurred at times, obviously, but by no means more than in any intrareligious coexistence. The age of globalization has increased the need for a peaceful coexistence like this – but has seen, alas, a dramatical loss of the same.

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[7] Cf. Nipkow, KE (1992), *Erwachsenwerden ohne Gott? Gotteserfahrung im Lebenslauf*, 4th edn, Munich.

[8] On the problem of the concept of 'Abrahamic Religions' cf.: Bernhardt, R (2019), *Inter-Religio. Das Christentum in Beziehung zu anderen Religionen* (Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen XVI), Zurich, pp. 373–393.

The dichotomy *of need on one hand and loss on* the other provides us with, what Melchior Cano would probably have called, a *locus theologicus*.[9]

In the following pages, therefore, I would like to envisage the dialogue between Christians and Muslimūn not only as a place where communication – which can ideally may lead to a certain kind of relationship – occurs, but more precisely as a place of theological insight. The starting point is the approach of Christian-Islamic dialogue introduced about one and a half decades ago by the Jesuit scholar Felix Körner, who characterizes Christian-Islamic dialogue markedly as a 'testimony in weakness'.

In addition to this kind of 'modern Roman-Catholic' view we can discover something similar from a more 'conservative protestant approach' in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose considerations start from a very different angle than Körner's, though in a political situation, which is, interestingly enough, relatively close to ours.

Felix Körner is not only a Christian theologian and Islamic scholar but has also been living and working 'locally' for some five years as leader of the Turkish-speaking Roman-Catholic parish in Ankara. For several years, he has also been teaching the study-program 'Islam and Christian-Muslim Encounter' at the Philosophical-Theological College Saint George's in Frankfurt/Main and at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana in Rome. Since 2021, he holds the 'Nicolaus Cusanus Chair for Theology of Religions' at the 'Central Institute for Catholic Theology' of Humboldt University in Berlin. His essential publication bears the exciting title *Church in the Face of Islam*.

In this central section, I'd like to open up and think further about the essential parts of Körner's research. In the closing chapter, I'm going to try and embed the same in the larger context of what we call education or, more precisely, adult formation. I am not developing a Christian-Islamic controversial theology systematically, nor do I intend to name any substantial aspects of an inter-religious conversation. What I would like to point out in the context of recent and present history, however, is how to focus on the basic principles presented here without which all further development always bears the danger of misunderstanding.

Körner's experience indicates that Christian-Islamic dialogue does not take place primarily at an academic level but occurs spontaneously between lay people. Muslim lay people, especially, present themselves not only as exceedingly well informed but also as competent interlocutors. Körner draws – hardly surprising – the conclusion that such a conversation usually fails, where I am merely aiming at the conversion of the other; that a dialogue proves but to be extremely fruitful, where the questioning by the other is opening up the possibility to get a clearer view of my own faith.

At this point, Körner´s motive of weakness comes into view.

The so-called Christian-Western World is, by Muslimūn (and also by Christian Arabs), by and large perceived as a threat. This threat is accompanied – from a Muslim point of view – by a widespread lack of ethical credibility among Christians manifested in many areas of the modern world. As a result, the term testimony gains relevance in an entirely new sense, namely, as a testimony that does not primarily

[9] Cano, M (1562), *De Locis theologicis,* Salamanca (posth.)

attempt to convince but simply tries to testify.[10] This is a verbal testimony which is also borne by the whole spectrum of the witness´ behaviour.

This approach is supported by an idea of Dietrich Bonhoeffer which he develops on the basis of the New Testament, more accurately, on that of the Sermon on the Mount, and which he presents in *The Cost of Discipleship* published in the year 1937, that is to say, during a time, where the question of faith is deeply embedded within the question of political option. Bonhoeffer clarifies that the proclamation of the Gospel is best characterized as – what Körner would call – 'testimony in weakness': While an idea may be 'irresistibly' asserted by fanaticism, the message of Jesus reaches its limits where it cannot occupy the other for itself:

> "The idea calls for fanatics who know neither resistance nor respect. The idea is strong. But the Word of God is so weak that it can be despised and rejected by men. There are stubborn hearts and closed doors for the Word, and the Word acknowledges the resistance it encounters and suffers it. It's a harsh cognition: there is nothing impossible about the idea; but there are impossibilities for the Gospel. The word is weaker than the idea."[11]

In this way, connections become visible between Bonhoeffer´s thinking and Körner´s experience. Both are shaped by unconditional respect of the hearer's freedom. The credibility of the gospel lies in its hiddenness in weakness, as is summed up in a Pauline phrase that Körner quotes as a motto of his work: Σπείρεται ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ. It is sown in weakness (1 Cor 15:43).

2.2. Terminology

a. It is important to point out a terminological observation which Körner mentions in passing[12] – because the essence of something is at times revealed by its name: Some religious designations refer to a group of people (Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism); the most ancient *surāt* in the *qur´ān,* however, are using the term *islām* as verbal noun for the ritual act of the five times daily prayer. Very soon, though, still within the era of the earliest *surāt*, in other words, still in Medinense time, the term *islām* shifts into a nominal title of a religion. The religious denomination *islām* thus starts from an act, out of an identifying *action*. Thus, *islām* understands itself as *the original* religion:
كان آدم أول ن, *kāna Ādam aual-ulmuslimīn* / Adam was the first muslim.[13]
b. As already noticed by the reader, I am using (in the nominative and except in composites) a coherent transliteration as well as the correct plural forms of the

[10] Cf. the difference between "*über*zeugen" und "*be*zeugen" in German!

[11] Bonhoeffer, D, DBW IV (1989) (Nachfolge / The Cost of Discipleship), Munich, pp. 180–81.

[12] Cf. Körner, F (2008), *Kirche im Angesicht des Islam. Theologie des interreligiösen Zeugnisses*, Stuttgart, p. 15.

[13] Though the qur´ān refers on multiple occasions to Ādam (*surāt* 2:31–37; 3:33; 7:11.19; 17:61; 20:115–122), this specific saying does not refer directly to the *qur´ān* or an *hadīth*.

Arabic concepts, firstly for reasons of self-evidence but also to avoid a Eurocentric perspective at the linguistic level as far as possible.

2.3. Place

My goal is a modest one. It does not proceed to a theology of religions encompassing *islām* and Christendom. It does not even stretch to the various ways Christians can share fellowship with people of other faiths. It first and foremost tries to formulate a kind of doctrine of principles of Christian-Islāmic dialogue. And by this it explores to what extent we can address Christian-Islāmic dialogue as a place of (Christian) theology, a *locus theologicus.*

But I would like to start with an assertion: Christian-Muslim dialogue stands out from what we commonly understand as *locus theologicus,* a 'place of theology', for the places we usually think of have in common that they are characterized as scientifically or individually immanent. What does this mean?

We could discuss urbanity as a prerequisite of multifaith-encounter, we could think about whether there is a multitude of theologies or a more or less broad spectrum of practices of faith and so on. However, all these questions move within the area of our own theology. At best, it can link these different parts together; but at the end of the day, it is always about the church as a communion of communication.[14]

In interreligious dialogue, however, we enter the church's periphery. Paradoxically, though, when it comes to periphery, it turns out to be about the very core. This is to be understood in a twofold sense, first of all topologically in the sense of the ten classical *loci theologici*, the way the Spanish Dominican Melchior Cano listed them in the middle of the 16th century, and thus also in the very specific situation of communication and dialogue we are dealing with. Körner locates the *loci* as being one step on the way towards a 'place' of dialogue.[15]

On the other hand, interreligious dialogue is to be understood as a specific location of theology since it occurs, i.e. takes place, ideally between Muslimūn and Christians. But here we encounter – in the words of Hans Joachim Sander – a European

[14] This play on words unfortunately only occurs in this translation. However, the original expression stands out due to the alliteration, which emphasizes the meaning: «Kommunikationsgemeinschaft Kirche» Uhl, F (2000), 'Theologie – Wissenschaft wovon? Über Gegenstandsbereiche, Wissenschaftsauffassungen, Rationalitätsstandards und andere historische Variable', Langthaler, R (Ed.), *Theologie als Wissenschaft. Ein Linzer Symposium*, Frankfurt/Main et al., pp. 51–96, p. 71.

[15] It is noteworthy, however, that for Körner Cano's distinction between *loci proprii* and *loci alieni* does not seem to play any significant role, for the *loci alieni* correspond to his inquiry into Cano's own theology 'from outside'. Otherwise he could have referred to the proposal of a renewed version and extension of the *loci theologici* by Peter Hünermann about 440 years after Cano, precisely because Hünermann reserves *his* 'loci alieni' specifically for the religions (in the plural!). Hünermann, P (2003), *Dogmatische Prinzipienlehre. Glaube – Überlieferung – Theologie als Sprach- und Wahrheitsgeschehen*, Münster, p. 224.

heterotopia[16] because one aspect is largely ignored: Communicative exchange between religions always touches on the question of power and powerlessness respectively. This is particularly true of the encounter between two religions, one of which has been in a position of inferiority over the past few centuries – as I shall make clear – while the other has spent most of its existence predominantly in the context of superior power structures. Therefore, if we ignore the aspect of power with the argument that it is primarily about questions of faith, we involuntarily create a heterotopia, a non-place that overshadows the whole discussion.

2.4. Approach

The relationship of the *islāmic* world to the West and thus, as a rule, implicit to Christianity has been shaped by the phenomenon of pre-colonial penetration [17] especially in the form of massive political influence by European powers. In addition to that, just before the outbreak of World War I, far-reaching areas of the Middle East found themselves under immediate Western control.[18] And again, the gap was deepened by the event and as yet undiminished effects of the *nakba* in 1948.

In order to look at this aspect from an entirely different angle, I would like to bring Dietrich Bonhoeffer into play who in his *Ethics*, begun in 1940, in a completely different, though we may say, complementary, context, discerns a fundamental difference, even opposition, between Orient and Occident. Bonhoeffer's thoughts on this issue may provide a background of the history of mentality against which this process of world history takes place.

Bonhoeffer first writes:

> "The liberated ratio proved their immeasurable power not so much in the question of faith and life, but in the discovery of the mysterious correspondence between laws of thought and of nature. Ratio becomes a working hypothesis, a heuristic principle that leads to the incomparable rise of technology. This is something entirely new in world history. Technology was, from the Egyptian pyramids to the Greek temples, from the medieval cathedrals to the 18th century, a matter of craftsmanship. It served religion, kingdoms, and art – ultimately, the daily needs of the people.
>
> Technology of Western Occident has liberated itself from its ancillary position; it has essentially ceased to be a service, and is now domination over nature. It is a completely new spirit that produces it, and through whose extinction it will come to an end again: the spirit of violent subjugation of nature to the thinking and experimenting human being.

[16] Sander, HJ, 'Europas Heterotopien. Die Zumutung von Gottes Orten in den Zeichen der Zeiten', *Theological Perspectives on Religion in Europe*, (Bulletin ET) Vol. XVIII (Berlin & al.), pp. 40–67, pp. 40–42.

[17] Cf. Hogarth, DG (1904), *The Penetration of Arabia. A Record of the Development of Western Knowledge Concerning the Arabian Peninsula,* New York (Reprint: Cambridge 2011).

[18] This questions in treated breathtakingly, and enormously detailed: Barr, J (2011), *A Line in the Sand. Britain, France and the Struggle for the Mastery of the Middle East,* New York.

> Technology becomes an end in itself. It has its own soul, and its symbol is the machine: the manifestation of rape and exploitation of nature. It is only modern technology that a naïve faith understandably objects to. It senses the exuberance of humanity, which tries to erect a counter-world against God's creation; technique, which surpasses time and space, is an endeavour against the divine; the benefits of technology fade behind its demons."

Before continuing:

> "It cannot be overlooked that technology has grown exclusively on the soil of the Occident, i.e. in a world shaped by Christianity and in many ways by the Reformation. By penetrating[19] into the Orient the meaning of technology changes completely as it loses its self-serving purpose.[20] The technical development in the islāmic world, for example, stays entirely at the service of faith in God and the building of the islāmic community. Ibn Sa'ūd[21] is said to have said in a conversation something like this: 'I don't exclude myself from European civilization, but I make use of it corresponding to Arabia, the Arabian soul, and the will of God … I brought machines from Europe, but I reject irreligiousness. The Muslim peoples must awaken from their dreams. They are in need of weapons, but the strongest weapon is faith in God, humble obedience to divine laws. Hatred is not from God, a hateful Europe will destroy itself with its own weaponry."[22]

This text illustrates impressively what countries not only of the Middle East but of the whole so-called Third World might have perceived and still perceive as a threat, which is in short: the replacement of religion by technology as something the West tries to achieve throughout the world. Christians of Western descent need to keep this empathically in mind when they encounter Muslimūn, especially Muslimūn of Arabic origin – something to which we'll return soon.

2.5. Encounter

What is it that enables the Christian to be met by a Muslim – insofar as this encounter immediately turns out to be an encounter between two religions? It is essential to gain a genuine interest in the other in his otherness! That is to say, the Christian ought to seek to avoid an attitude that loses interest in the particularity of their counterpart as soon as the counterpart shows no interest in a conversion.[23] A "prepared refutation of the world view of another human being"[24] is not our business as Chris-

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[19] Here Bonhoeffer makes use of the 'key term' (see above), most likely involuntarily!

[20] Orig. «Selbstzwecklichkeit». Bonhoeffer obvously means 'serving purpose' («Zweckdienlichkeit»).

[21] Founder of the latest and still governing (Wahhabi) dynasty on the Arabian peninsula (1880–1953).

[22] Bonhoeffer, D, DBW VI (1992) (Ethik / Ethics), Munich, pp. 106–7 (Emphasis M.K.)

[23] Körner (2008), p. 13.

[24] Körner (2008), p. 17.

tians. In a nutshell: It is worthwhile, indeed, to set out to defend my own belief but the goal must not be "defeating of the other".[25] Körner emphasizes: "Mission … cannot be strategically planned. On the contrary, it requires transcending all images of the other."[26] A certain form of testimony replaces the conventional act of mission. I shall develop in more depth how this is constituted.

First of all: 1. "Every single encounter" with one who is alien to my own worldview is "different beyond comparison".[27] One task of this uniqueness could be to open both interlocutors – not merely one of them – *for change of heart.* 2. If Christians and Muslimūn enter into a dialogue, two specific phenomena can generally be observed: a) Christians all of a sudden find themselves in a position in which they have to defend views argumentatively or apologetically that previously seemed completely self-evident to them. b) They suddenly find themselves being confronted with questions that previously did not concern them as individuals, namely in particular with the so-called "ecclesiastical history of guilt"[28], which has repeatedly undermined and continues to undermine the credibility of the church.

With such considerations, however, are we not declaring the justification of our faith to be a special case which does not happen to us every day? Quite the opposite seems to be the case: for according to 1 Pet 3:15, Christians are to be able to give account for their faith at any given moment. This assertion can be understood to mean that faith, in its true sense, is only present where a person is "prepared to respond to objections";[29] anything else arouses the suspicion of mere "stubbornness"[30].

A positive expectation, therefore, is the possibility that, first and foremost in the dialogue of Christianity with *islām*,[31] that specific Christian characteristics will become clearer even in the polemic inquiry of the former by the latter. It may well turn out that the "surprising encounter demanding justification offers a unique opportunity for … the Church to bring to light the essential features of Christianity" which would remain "invisible" without this challenge.[32]/[33]

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[25] Ibd.

[26] Orig. «Schuldgeschichte der Kirche». Körner (2008), p. 338.

[27] Ibd.

[28] Körner (2008), p. 16.

[29] Körner (2008), p. 14.

[30] Ibd.

[31] This is true, *mutatis mutandis*, also for an encounter with other religions; for the encounter with Islām, however, in an emphatic sense, because religious studies count Islām to the 'species' of the 'Abrahamic religions' (see above), and also for reasons of sociology of religion and sociology of migration.

[32] Körner (2008), p. 16 (Emphasis M.K.)

[33] If we, by the way, study the sources of Christian-Islamic encounter in the past, we will inevitably notice, "The more … Christian thinkers go all out, the more radical their intention to convert is—namely to conversion to *unity*—, the more aptly they succeed in the theological explication of the Christian faith. The perception of others as different proves to be a source of knowledge." Which gives rise to the highly interesting question of how "the other, the unexplored field, the stranger, could be taken advantage of in theological research". Körner (2008), p. 340.

2.6. Past & present

In the past, Christianity used to approach *islām* from an "occidental distance",[34] trying to "grasp" it in "categories of Latin provenance".[35] The church would always view the encounter with *islām as teleological*, i.e., she would aim at a) either the conversion of the Muslimūn, b) an agreement on certain questions, c) or even full union.[36] It is doubtful, obviously, whether a real meeting of two equal partners is even conceivable under these conditions.

In contrast, the starting point for an encounter in this day and age can only be a strictly dialogical communication based on a "philosophy of dialogue",[37] a willingness to talk "that accepts the radical otherness of the interlocutor".[38] Here the genre of the *testimony* has its specific place, for it is not primarily about overcoming an opponent, but about witnessing to a partner.

2.7. Implementation

In everyday life, we can observe Christian-Muslim encounter in different ways. Several forms of encounter exist side by side, taking place simultaneously, so that, considering the whole spectrum, we can speak with Körner in terms of a fivefold dialogue.[39]

1. Dialogue of common daily life,
2. Dialogue of common action,
3. Dialogue of academic exchange,
4. Dialogue of religious experience,
5. Interreligious debate among theologically "non formally educated believers"[40] (discourse of laypeople).[41]

The *qur'ān* and even more so contemporary Muslim publications are providing the Western world with indications as to how Muslimūn perceive Christianity and its

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[34] Körner (2008), p. 17.

[35] Ibd.

[36] To the following cf. Körner (2008), p. 339.

[37] Körner (2008), p. 17.

[38] Ibd.

[39] To the following cf. Körner (2008), p. 23.

[40] Ibd.

[41] Körner adds: "It sheds fresh light on the concept of laity, when Muslims, especially if they are not in a formal sense theologically trained, quickly act like controversial theologians, though, in general, by no means aggressive, but with the gesture of *gladly sharing* the truth gratefully recognized and apparently immediately obvious. While almost every Muslim sees himself as an authorized representative and expert of his own religion, Christians occasionally withdraw from the discussion by declaring themselves to be theologically incompetent. By this the ´layperson´ becomes the incompetent in the first place." Ibd. (Emphasis M.K.) It is noticeable that Islām doesn´t know the recurring tension between theology and the church or between science and a teaching magisterium in the same way as Christianity. Ibd.

representatives and what they hope to have in common but also what they are afraid of in terms *of occupation*. As already indicated, this can lead to challenging investigations against Christianity. How do Christians deal with those?[42] Should Christians turn away, being offended? Is it advisable to avoid the challenge by giving the conversation an extra-theological, psychological, sociological, or legal twist? Do Christians reject the claim for absolute truth? "Are they, who present their belief with an absolute claim, already disqualified by expressing themselves in the first place?"[43]

According to Körner, this opportunity is to be seized for it is precisely in polemical discourse that the accountability of the Christian is emphatically demanded: "Where [else] does Christian theology in the 21st century find such interest in the truth of faith? For a Christian theology concerned with central confessions and argumentation [such a challenge] is by no means a nuisance, but highly to be welcomed."[44]

2.8. Loci theologici

In contrast to Aristotle's dialectic which assumes a common conception of reality, i.e. a common rationale shared by interlocutors, his topic[45] offers the possibility of constantly determining new *loci* in the course of the debate even within divergent views on reality and "arriving at an appropriate point of argumentative progress in each case".[46]

It is obvious, too, that religious controversy is not exclusively about the rational dimension of reality. In this context, Rüdiger Bubner, quoted by Körner, points out that it is precisely this non-rational part of our everyday life that forms the "basic equipment of our rational relation to reality".[47] One of the tasks of interreligious dialogue is therefore to constantly re-adjust my own value system.[48] Religion deals with my deeper identity, "religious people", therefore show "no quick readiness to give up their view on reality".[49] This doesn't necessarily mean a "lack of rationality: Their persistence is most likely an expression of the awareness that the content of their confession means more to them than anything else".[50] It is thus essential to interreligious conversation to take an unpredictable course. In such a case, however, the *topoi* – in Christian terms, the *loci theologici* – help to constantly discover new points of view and lines in the course of the discussion.[51]

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42 To the following cf. Körner (2008), p. 24.

43 Ibd.

44 Körner (2008), p. 26 (Emphasis M.K.)

45 Topika: 8 books = part V of his logic (organon), around 40 BC.

46 Körner (2008), p. 340.

47 (Orig. «Fundus unserer rationalen Sachbezüge») Körner (2008), p. 341.

48 Ibd.

49 Ibd.

50 Ibd.

51 Remarkably in its own way in interfaith dialogue is the 'compliance' between two partners, even where the view on reality between them must be considered as different. What does it mean, e.g., when Christians and Muslimūn say they believe in the same God? Cf. Körner (2008), p. 340–41.

2.9. Notae theologiae

In the course of the further investigation, Körner identifies six *notae theologiae*,[52] in which the genre of testimony unfolds in six ways, regardless of its context. As such, he names confession, testimony, reason, release, relation, and conversion.[53]

1. Confession is based on the commitment to my own value-system.
2. Testimony is based on a relationship to my own value-system.
3. Reason makes my own value-system comprehensive for the partner of the conversation.
4. Release allows for the free development of this conversation, instead of having a victory in sight.
5. Establishing a relation between my counterpart and me allows them to come into contact to my own value-system.
6. I am open to be corrected, even converted, in the face of the dissimilar perspective and experience of the other.

2.10. Testimony in weakness

This general and religiously neutral definition of the six *notae theologiae* can therefore be transformed as follows:

1. Confession: Christians confess to be committed to the Easter faith, the vicarious death of Jesus on the cross at a specific point in history.
2. Testimony: Christians testify to be associated with this Easter, that is to say, they bear witness that the death of Jesus on the cross is not only a doctrine but has also permanent consequences affecting him in his personality.
3. Reason: Christians try to make their value-system as comprehensible as possible for the interlocutors. As a cause for the event of salvation, they name the anthropological constant of sin, under which all humanity lives. This they describe as captivity but salvation as liberation from sin.
4. Release: Christians seek to win the individual over as freely consenting to what is known, witnessed, and reasoned.
5. Relation: Christians try to achieve this by enabling others to come into contact with their own known, witnessed, and reasoned value-system, that is, by acting relationally.
6. *Conversion*: Just as the history of Christianity is not petrified in a certain historical moment, so too does the individual Christian, as a member of the Church, remain correctable – even convertible – through contact with perspectives that seem alien to him at first glance.

[52] Körner (2008), p. 341–43.

[53] Orig. «Bekenntnis, Zeugnis, Begründung, Befreiung, Beziehung, Bekehrung».

Thus, the *notae theologiae* not only convey one's own understanding of reality, but they are part of the person's reality of life. This is to be understood in a complex sense:

- The six *notae* can open up striking ways of Christian witnessing – once again: confess, testify, reason, release, relate, convert.
- These verbs signify the renunciation of a search for my own superiority, indeed, they are, as it were, verbs of invitation, even of surrender.
- They reveal the testimony of the entire Christian, which is to say that the entire Christian life is testimony, in fact, a testimony that renounces the overcoming the other: It is a testimony in weakness.

2.11. Summary and outlook

We have so far assumed that, in general, the attitude of the Western world towards *islāmic* countries today, more than ever, must be perceived as a threat. This affects Christianity insofar as the Western world today still implicitly or explicitly views itself – or is seen – as 'Christian'. This is what Christians need to be aware of so as to be capable of understanding that Muslimūn not only feel that their worldview is being questioned but also that their entire culture and tradition is attacked in a broader sense.

Nevertheless, Christians are to speak out about their faith. Not only are they permitted, they are downright commanded to do so, since, according to Körner with reference to 1 Pet 3:15, only the justifying (and testifying) faith is faith.

A wide range of situations can be identified in which the testimony of faith is asked, encouraged, or even provoked. Körner's experience shows that it is first and foremost the laity who have a particular significance as witnesses of the church. One can imagine a number of behaviours that constitute such a testimony. Closer examination makes evident that these are means of communication, which by their very nature create and invite into a relationship, indeed, into a communication that allows of the questioning of my own attitude. It is dialogue in consistently parity sense. This dialogue has its own peculiar strength because it shows a genuine, not a purposeful interest in the other as other. Its power is not to be superior to the other but to let them be.[54]

Körner does not substantiate his theology of interreligious testimony exegetically, but motives from the New Testament do resonate. 2 Cor 12:9.10, however, does not come to mind for it is about a peculiar dialectic in which the moment of strength is not entirely neglected. Rather, the Sermon on the Mount is what resonates. It is notoriously concerned with the weakness of the disciples as a quality in itself not in order

[54] Cf. Beinert, W (1991), *Katholischer Fundamentalismus. Häretische Gruppen in der Kirche?*, Regensburg: 1. Intransigence: Irreconcilability in dealing with dissenters and people of other faiths, who are not perceived as opponents but are stylized as enemies; 2. Compartmentalization to different views and convictions; 3. Authoritarianism towards ecclesiastical or papal authority, combined with rigorous obedience; 4. Reductionism: Narrowing the fullness of Catholicism to figures and beliefs; 5. Lack of willingness to engage in dialog and inability to dispute.

to contrastingly show off the power of the Gospel. The Gospel itself is weak in the Sermon on the Mount. What is this supposed to mean? This is precisely what Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about in a way that is anything but self-evident in his own time. Bonhoeffer's words cannot be heard without the context that besets him in those years.

Something quite similar applies to the dialogue between Christians and Muslimūn. It, too, raises questions and – as *locus theologicus* – can only be thought of as part of a larger, equally urgent context.[55] Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thoughts should therefore be concluding the central panel of this triptych:

> "Not only is judgment forbidden to the disciple, but also has the proclaiming word of salvation and forgiveness to the other its limitation. The disciple of Jesus has neither the power nor the right to impose it on anyone at any given time. … The striving restlessness of the disciples, who doesn´t[56] want to acknowledge any boundaries [of the Gospel] on their effectiveness, confuses the word of the Gospel with a victorious idea. The idea calls for fanatics who know neither resistance nor respect. The idea is strong. But the Word of God is so weak that it can be despised and rejected by men.[57] There are stubborn hearts and closed doors for the Word, and the Word acknowledges the resistance it encounters, and suffers it. It's a harsh cognition: there is nothing impossible about the idea; but there are impossibilities for the Gospel. The word is weaker than the idea. … The disciples, ignorant of this weakness of the Word, would not have known [sic[58]] the mystery of the lowliness of God."[59]

3. How everything is connected

Finally, I would like to tie together the threads we have spun up to this point and embed into a wider context what we, with a view to a specific case, so far have presented. In the same way that education leads to responsibility in the context of the individual, in a global context it evokes, in my opinion, a recontextualization of Christianity.

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[55] "… when right-wing radicals in Israel call for the *final solution* of the Palestinian problem..." Arens, E (1992) in the preface of the German translation of: Ellis, MH (1987), *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, St. Waco, TX [Ellis, MH (1992), *Zwischen Hoffnung und Verrat. Schritte auf dem Weg einer jüdischen Theologie der Befreiung* transl. Steinhauser, M, Luzern. / 3rd [expanded] edn with prefaces from Tutu, D and Gutiérrez, G: Ellis, MH (2011), *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, St. Waco, TX.]

[56] Sic. The verb refers to the first noun in the sentence, not the second!

[57] "Despised and rejected by men." It is only the English translation which alludes to Is 53:3 (KJV)! Bonhoeffer's choice of words („daß es sich von Menschen verachten und verwerfen läßt") doesn't resonate with Luther's rendition: „Er war so verachtet, daß man das Angesicht vor ihm verbarg."

[58] Main clause: subjunctive—subordinate clause: indicative.

[59] Bonhoffer, D, DBW IV (1989) (Nachfolge / Cost of Discipleship), Munich, pp. 180–81.

3.1. Two faces of responsibility

Talking about responsibility we realize even more the meaningfulness of what in the opening part I called 'paradoxical reciprocity': We can only attain identity through dialogue with the world – but at the same time, conversely, dialogue with the world is only possible on the basis of a successful identity.

In other words, responsibility (*Mündigkeit*) is, as the *Historical Dictionary of Pedagogy* puts it succinctly: "Responsibility not only signifies the ability – literally – to 'give a response', that is, to take a stand not to be patronized; responsibility also means the competence of self-reflection, the ability to scrutinize my own life, to reflect on my own relationship with others, and of an ongoing development of myself."[60]

Responsibility is Janus-faced for one side looks towards the direction of what we could call the ability to dialogue, in other words: I can listen to others; I try to understand; I try to express my own position within the dialogue in an appropriate way, and at the same time consider and revise it critically. Its opposite facet we could name ability to plurality: I am able to face the social reality with its different patterns of interpretation, worldviews, and ways of life: I am able to engage with other people's positions, I can develop empathy for people and ideas from other backgrounds – I can even encourage these.

3.2. Recontextualization

At this point, I would like to demonstrate why interreligious dialogue, from my point of view, serves as a prototype of adult religious formation. It is not just about the individual adult and their individual maturity; it is about a recontextualization of Christianity in the contemporary (occidental) world as such.

With the concept of recontextualization, I pick up a term used by Helmut Fend by augmenting it, as it were: I do not refer to the relationship between Christianity and the individual, as Fend does,[61] but to the relationship between Christianity and the world. The modern (Western) world is characterized by a number of features, which are all known too well: Sociologically we speak of secularization, individualization, and pluralization; and however disputable these terms are, they at least shed a light on phenomena which need to be debated; and they have the advantage that they are, so to speak, translatable into theological terms such as "de-churchification", "de-traditionalization", "de-Christianization".[62]

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[60] Benner, D; Brüggen, F, (2010) 'Mündigkeit', Benner, D; Oelkers, J (Ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Pädagogik*, Darmstadt, pp. 687–699.

[61] Fend, H (2008), *Schule gestalten: Systemsteuerung, Schulentwicklung und Unterrichtsqualität*, Wiesbaden.

[62] («Entkirchlichung, Enttraditionalisierung, Entchristlichung») Kaufmann, FX (2011), *Kirchenkrise. Wie überlebt das Christentum?*, Freiburg/Breisgau. / Kaufmann, FX (2012), *Kirche in der ambivalenten Moderne*, Freiburg/Breisgau.

In today's world, only then does Christianity have a chance to flourish (humanly speaking), if it discovers itself in a new way: in the form of an existence as dialogue, that is to say: only in dialogue, more accurately, only *in constructive* dialogue, with other religions and worldviews as well as with social, political and economic dynamics that no longer include Christianity automatically, in other words, against the background of Felix Körner's testimony in weakness – and without the fanaticism already denounced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer – will Christendom and church be capable of speaking in their own uniqueness to the world.

A religious education which turns out to be on time, a punctual religious education, as Rudolf Englert[63] puts it, is, literally, forced to take people seriously as part of their *Lebenswelt*, to their way of life, and, at the same time, to always refer one *Lebenswelt* to the *Lebenswelt* of the profoundly different. Then it may happen, all of a sudden, that the other turns out to be not so entirely different as I might initially had suspected; the talk of a Christian West turns out to be questionable anyway, if I thereby suggest that European culture is exclusively shaped by the characteristics of Christianity.

The cultural history of Europe is actually far more diverse. An essential factor of European cultural and intellectual history is also Judaism; and *islām*, too, shows itself, past and present, as, in a positive sense, an important cultural driving force of our occidental world: just think of the interactions in the Middle Ages (what an unlucky term!) in the realm of philosophical exchange and the countless influences in European – and Jewish-European – architecture.

The Christian Occident in the sense of an ecclesiastically and politically unified culture, this Golden Age will hardly return because it is a fiction which never existed in reality. It will not recur even if we want to discover religious elements in a completely new way in contemporary culture in Europe, like, for example, Ralph Hoburg does, who asserts a new visibility of religion.[64]

The process of pluralization of religion in our society, which has its roots in religious individualization and detraditionalization (i.e. the extensive turning away from institutionally organized church), will hardly prove to be revisable.

3.3. Interruption

Do we earnestly want to lament over the coming of age of the world as Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it?[65] Perhaps it is precisely this demolition that proves to be for our best. To this end, however, I need to introduce yet another term, namely the concept of interruption.

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[63] Englert, R (1985), *Glaubensgeschichte und Bildungsprozeß. Versuch einer religionspädagogischen Kairologie*, Munich, pp. 693–96.

[64] Hoburg, R (2010), *Zur neuen Sichtbarkeit von Religion*, in: Johannsen, F (Ed.), *Postsäkular? Religion im Zusammenhang gesellschaftlicher Transformationsprozesse*, Stuttgart, p. 23–41.

[65] «Mündig gewordene Welt». Bonhoeffer, D, DBW VIII (1998) (Widerstand und Ergebung / Letters and Papers from Prison), Munich.

Interruption occurs, according to Lieven Boeve, in two different dimensions.[66] On the one hand, Boeve ascertains a global interruption at the level of history, namely, with regard to the religion of Christianity. On the other hand he designates every single act of education as an act of interruption, which puts our previous view of life on hold for a minute and reformats it.

In interreligious dialogue, we experience a simultaneous unfolding of three dimensions of interruption. Interreligious dialogue enables us to bear witness to the other: firstly, I acknowledge the other as other, secondly, my own identity is brought into sharper focus, and thirdly, my own responsibility lies essentially in my capacity for plurality.

What we – perhaps somewhat pompously – have been calling Christianity for almost two thousand years (i.e. 1700 years) is apparently coming to an end. The future of Christian faith lies entirely and solely in a new contextualization. (Perhaps it is precisely this perspective that proves to be a hermeneutical instrument that will enable us to understand Bonhoeffer's term religion-less Christianity more precisely – but that is another story.)

In a fascinating way, something comes full circle: interruption is always new, of course, but at the same time it shows its surprising theological roots and the connectedness to the Old Testament's source as involuntary adult formation, of which we spoke at the beginning. The prophets are permanently interrupting. They provoke and scrutinize; they break open the human world and expand it. Jesus himself lives and communicates within this Old Testament tradition. He takes up everyday occurrences – but immediately interrupts their reassuring ordinariness: in Mt 20, unjust wages are paid;[67] two chapters later, people turn down the invitation to a glamorous wedding reception and instead prefer the dreary everyday routine,[68] similar things happen in many more places.

Adult Christian formation can therefore, in other words, lead to this: instead of lamenting the end of a Christian age, what we experience in the present we can interpret as profiling and sharpening of Christian faith: Christian faith suddenly proves not to be simply a confirmation of what I have always been knowing. It rather turns out to be disillusioning: the spiritual wellness I am looking for, it does not offer me at all. Instead, faith wants to disturb and irritate me, and disrupt my usual, well-worn routine: μετάνοια! The person who sums this up in the most illuminating way is Johann Baptist Metz who states: "The shortest definition of religion is interruption."[69]

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[66] Boeve, L (2002), *Interrupting Tradition. An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context*, Louvain. / Boeve, L(2007), *God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval,* New York. / Boeve, L, 'Unterbrechung und Identität in der pluralistischen Welt von heute. Spiritualität und das offene christliche Narrativ', Kunz, R & Kohli Reichenbach, C (2012), *Spiritualität im Diskurs. Spiritualitätsforschung in theologischer Perspektive,* Zurich, p. 161–179.

[67] Mt 20:1–16.

[68] Mt 22:1–14.

[69] Metz, JB (1977), *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, Mainz, p. 150.

What this prototype of interreligious dialogue, as I tried to introduce it, emphasizes in all its sharpness, we can therefore extend to the wider area of adult Christian education: adult Christian formation comes to full fruition where it enables its participants to critically reflect on their usual patterns of thought and action so as to become by such an interruption more capable, to break new ground, to emerge from crises with new confidence (I deliberately avoid saying 'strength'!).

3.4. Prospects

Against an even broader horizon, formation is a process involving the whole person; education is the empowerment of people for self-determination while, paradoxically, the social dimension plays an essential role in the process.

Christian adult formation is particularly sensitive to religious developments and changes in our society. It acknowledges other religious concepts of meaning, which are evident in our pluralistic society precisely because they are different, and takes them theologically seriously. (This is more than mere tolerance.) Only in this way, both the individual as well as Christianity as a whole proves to be 'capable of plurality'.[70]

The polyphony of religious concepts is of particular interest for Christian education precisely because it avoids one-sidedness and narrow perceptions. She does not confuse, for example, the terms *islām* – Arabic: الإسْلَام – with *islāmism* – Arabic: الإسلاموية.

Adult Christian formation presents itself as a forum for dialogue, in which the conversation about religious and social developments may be conducted openly. In interfaith educational events, Christian adult formation in particular endeavors to understand other religions from their own perspective. It is not my own interpretation of the other person but their self-interpretation that guides the dialogue. The presence of the other interrupts my self-centred identity and makes me aware of my limits and my conditionalities. The other puts my own identity into question – especially in religious terms. I am no longer able talk about God on my own, that is to say, in relation to my own Christian tradition but only relationally, i.e. in relation to people of other faiths.

Ralph Bergold and Reinhold Boschki are getting to the heart of the matter in a sentence of fascinating simplicity: "The realization that everything could be completely different becomes the motivational background and thus forms the backdrop for the educational process."[71]

The realization that everything could be completely different is absolutely crucial.

This idea is more than just a distant echo of our opening motto, it unfolds what lies hidden in this observation:

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[70] Englert, R & Schwab, U & Schweitzer, F & Ziebertz, HG (2021), *Welche Religionspädagogik ist pluralitätsfähig? Strittige Punkte und weiterführende Perspektiven,* Freiburg/Breisgau.

[71] Bergold, R & Boschki, R (2014), *Einführung in die religiöse Erwachsenenbildung*, Darmstadt, p. 65.

> "An as yet unrealized potential especially of adult church education appears to lie in participation in ecumenical and interreligious relations. Adult protestant formation can provide with special – not to say unique – experiences that are difficult to access in other church settings. Participation in ecumenical and interreligious relations owns educational power as such – even if the respective encounter is not specifically designed as a learning process."[72]

This is why adult Christian education always is a testimony in weakness—it is the opposite of strength.

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Part III
Diversity and Society

The Christian Right in Germany and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD). Religious othering and group-focused enmity

Jan Christian Pinsch

> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."
>
> (Luke 18: 9-14)

Abstract

For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, a far-right party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), received the most votes in the state elections in Thuringia in 2024. There as well as nationwide, the shocking revelation of the "remigration" plans had no lasting impact on the AfD's high poll ratings. In the 2025 federal election, 20.8%, i.e. more than 10 million Germans, voted for the party which is classified as a suspected right-wing extremist by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. The party even appears to be electable and a real alternative for many conservative Christians. In fact, there are overlaps between the AfD and conservative Christianity in core issues such as marriage and family, gender and sexuality as well as Islam and migration. This essay shows how religious othering and group-focused enmity characterise the political orientation of the AfD, making it an option for large sections of the Christian right in Germany and how the mutual relationship with the Protestant Church in Germany can be seen.

Keywords

Christian Right, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Religious othering, Group-focus enmity

1. Religious othering

The logic of othering follows a simple concept. People are thought of in binaries: One's own group, 'we', is understood as the norm and those who are not deemed 'normal' are therefore 'the others' – a dynamic that often leads to marginalization. In this

process, the other is often reduced to a few, perhaps even just a single characteristic. When it comes to religion, it seems to be easy to attribute and prejudge others. Deborah Krieg from the Anne Frank Educational Centre (*Bildungsstätte Anne Frank*) speaks of a (supposed) "knowledge about others", in which religion "proves to be a well-tested and much-used vehicle for constructions of difference and othering processes".[1] For example, a Muslim woman's headscarf could be the single defining characteristic which is reinterpreted as an identity marker.

The above-mentioned quotation from the Bible also contains a form of religious othering. In 2022, the authors Mark Juergensmeyer, Kathleen Moore (both University of California, Santa Barbara) and Dominic Sachsenmaier (Göttingen University) published the book *Religious Othering. Global Dimensions*. In their introduction they write:

> "When people say, 'thank God we're not like them', they are perhaps unconsciously revealing an ethnocentric bias that in its extreme form is a kind of religious othering. This phenomenon has spread throughout the world in the first decades of the 21st century and in its political form has led to ethnic cleansing and strident anti-minority hostilities."[2]

According to the authors, there is a long tradition of religious othering. "Globalization and national sentiment shape the dynamics of religious othering today, but they did not create it."[3] Negative stereotypes about other faiths are probably as old as religions themselves if we think, for example, of the systematic persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire or the long history of (Christian) anti-Semitism.[4]

The authors point out an interesting contradiction: Religious othering is anti-globalism but global in its scope as we can observe the emergence of new tribalism, which is often organized around ethnic and religious identities. Globalization can be seen as direct challenge to the "old notion of a cultural homogeneity of nationhood": most European countries are confronting fellow citizens in their population "who look differently, speak differently, and worship differently" – actually Brussels is being used as their example: "When a large section of Brussels is comprised of Algerian Muslim refugees, even a multi-cultural country like Belgium finds it difficult to cope."[5]

In response to these new immigrations, a right-wing political turn has taken place in large parts of Europe in recent decades. Juergensmeyer/Moore/Sachsenmaier write:

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1 Krieg, D (2017), 'Das Wissen über die Anderen. Fremdzuschreibungen im Kontext von Religion', in: Cheema, S. (Ed.), *(K)eine Glaubensfrage. Religiöse Vielfalt im pädagogischen Miteinander*, Frankfurt am Main: Bildungsstätte Anne Frank, pp. 15–18, 15f. If a German-language source is given, the quoted text is a translation by the author.

2 Juergensmeyer, M & Moore, K & Sachsenmaier, D (2023), *Religious Othering. Global Dimensions*, New York: Routledge, p. 1.

3 Juergensmeyer & Moore & Sachsenmaier, *Religious Othering*, p. 4.

4 Juergensmeyer & Moore & Sachsenmaier, *Religious Othering*, p. 4.

5 Juergensmeyer & Moore & Sachsenmaier, *Religious Othering*, pp. 1f.

> "At the heart of these political movements are personal fears. Individuals have seen the arrival of newcomers as threatening to their way of life. Accompanying this sense of being cultural assaulted is the cultural pretension that the newcomers are insufficient in many ways – not just culturally and socially but intellectually and morally. The phrase 'thank God we're not like them' expresses this feeling that the outliers are a distant 'other' to which the traditional society is vastly superior and that this attitude is blessed by God. […] At its very core, religious othering is grounded in negative stereotypes and the systematic buildup of an imagined divide between one's own faith and other creeds. It emphasizes the communalities of one's own group and exaggerates the difference of others."[6]

Concerning the phrase 'thank God we are not like them' based on Luke 18:9-14, exegetes warn against an offensive reading of the Pharisees in the parable because otherwise there would be a "danger of encouraging its other hearers to regard them with something of the outlook that the parable itself condemns".[7] Eric Franklin also emphasises in the *Oxford Bible Commentary* that it is "not suggested that he [this particular Pharisee] was typical of all Pharisees any more than it maintains that the one in the parable stood for all tax-collectors"[8]. In the context of this study, this means: if you do not want to fall into the trap of othering yourself, you need clear criteria to categorize forms of exclusion.

2. Group-focused enmity

Whenever people are divided into groups on the basis of a single common characteristic and are thus devalued and excluded, social science speaks of group-focused enmity (*Gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit*). Its characteristics have been analyzed since 2002 in a long-term study at Bielefeld University. At its core, it expresses the attribution of inequality to certain groups who are "denied equality, participation and belonging due to assigned and socially constructed characteristics of cultural, ethnic or national origin, religion, gender, sexual identity, social situation or disability"[9]. According to the initiators of the study – Andreas Zick and Beate Küpper in particular –, this leads to those addressed being "confronted with ignorance, devaluation, marginalization, malice, perversity, discrimination and even violence"[10]. The researchers also emphasize the function of belonging to one's own group: "The devaluation of others helps to strengthen the self-esteem that results from belonging to a

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6 Juergensmeyer & Moore & Sachsenmaier, *Religious Othering*, p. 4.

7 Franklin, E 2022, *Luke* (The Oxford Bible Commentary), viewed 12 September 2024, (https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780198755005.001.0001/acref-9780198755005-chapter-63?rskey=XnQCPk#acref-9780198755005-chapter-141-div2-4043).

8 Franklin, *Luke*.

9 Zick, A & Küpper, B & Berghan, W (2019), *Verlorene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände. Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2018/19*, Bonn: Dietz, p. 55.

10 Zick & Küpper & Berghan, *Verlorene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände*, p. 56.

reference group 'we.'"[11] A few selected elements of group-focused enmity are listed in this diagram:

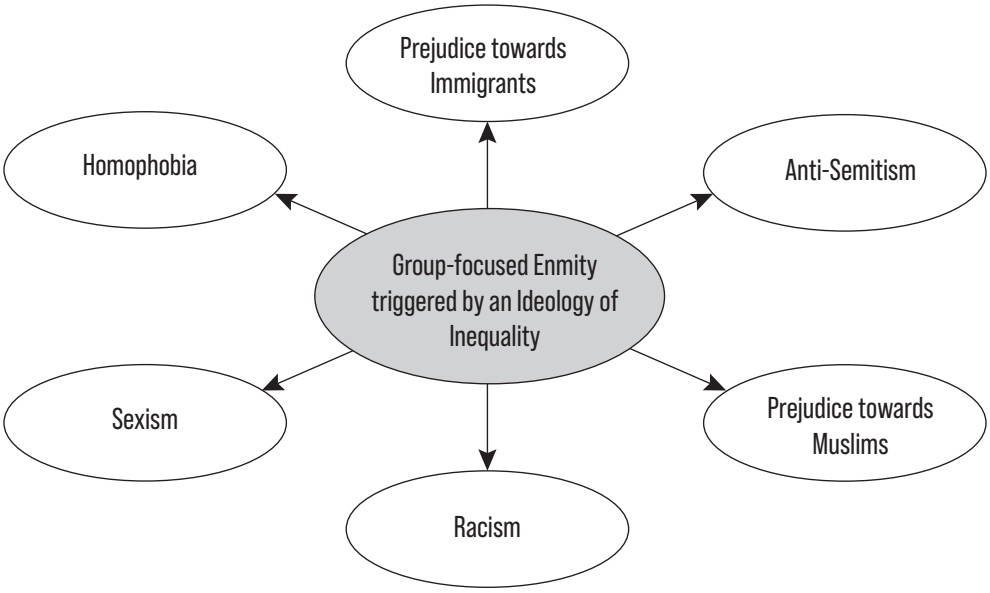

Figure 1 – The syndrome of Group-focused Enmity in Europe. Zick, A & Küpper, B 2009, European Conditions. Findings of a study on Group-focused Enmity in Europe, viewed 12 September 2024, (https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/w/files/pdfs/gfepressrelease_english.pdf)

3. Right-wing populism in Germany

Jan-Werner Müller sees right-wing populism as national or ethnocultural identity politics that serves to marginalize others: "All those who do not share the symbolic construction of the 'true people' do not actually belong to the people at all."[12] The consequences are anti-pluralism and a culture war "in which political speech consists primarily of assigning or denying affiliation to individuals and groups".[13]

The developer of the concept of group-focused enmity, Wilhelm Heitmeyer, writes that there has been a great right-wing populist potential throughout Germany since at least the beginning of the millennium and speaks of a "radicalisation without political offers" for the period from 2002 to 2011.[14] Although right-wing conservative

[11] Zick & Küpper & Berghan, *Verlorene Mitte – Feindselige Zustände*, p. 57.

[12] Müller, JW (2019), *„Das wahre Volk" gegen alle anderen. Rechtspopulismus als Identitätspolitik*, in: APuZ 9-11/2019, pp. 18–24, p. 18.

[13] Müller, *„Das wahre Volk" gegen alle anderen*, pp. 18f.

[14] Heitmeyer, W (2018), *Autoritäre Versuchungen*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, p. 207.

and radical market forces were already organising within the centre-right CDU party starting in 2007, they initially hesitated to form their own right-wing party. The adoption of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) ultimately led to the founding of the 'Wahlalternative 2013', the direct predecessor of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which was founded on 14 April 2013. It is debatable whether the AfD can be categorised as a single-issue party in its early days – namely an anti-Euro party. One argument against this is the "Civil Coalition" (*Zivile Koalition*) founded by Beatrix von Storch, which is categorised as Christian fundamentalist, it acted as a hinge between the other two groups. Stefan Dietl summarises: "For the first time since the founding of the Federal Republic, a right-wing collective movement managed to establish itself in the political party spectrum. The AfD succeeded in uniting radical market elites as well as national conservative hardliners, Christian fundamentalist activists and ethnic nationalists."[15] According to Dietl, the basis of the AfD's politics was and is the marginalization of and discrimination against LGBT people, women, migrants, refugees and the socially disadvantaged.[16] With the radicalization that began in 2015 at the latest, migration and Islam became a particular focus of the party. In addition to the fear of Islam and immigrants, the typical topics of the AfD today are abortion, family support, gender identities and protests against pandemic regulations and vaccinations. Today the AfD is categorised – at least in part – as right-wing extremist.

4. The Christian Right in Germany and their link to the AfD

Since the foundation of the AfD, observers repeatedly emphasised that Protestant fundamentalism had a "prominent advocate in the AfD" in Beatrix von Storch, and that her handwriting was "in part clearly recognisable" in the party's programmes.[17] In some cases, AfD programme drafts contained almost identical wording from papers by the so-called Family Protection Initiative (*Initiative Familien-Schutz*) founded by Beatrix von Storch and her husband Sven von Storch, which sees the institutions of marriage and family under threat – not least due to what they call gender ideology. In 2016, for example, it said in a paragraph about the school system:

> "The AfD is committed to Christian tradition, humanism and enlightenment as supporting pillars of German and European culture and to the Christian-humanist canon of values. [...] The traditional image of the family must [...] not be destroyed. Our

[15] Dietl, S (2017), *Die AfD und die soziale Frage. Zwischen Marktradikalismus und ‚völkischem Antikapitalismus'*, Münster: Unrast, pp. 22f.

[16] Dietl, *Die AfD und die soziale Frage*, p. 27.

[17] Brandes, R 2022, *Christen und die AfD. Keine „Pauschalverurteilung der gesamten AfD"*, viewed 12 September 2024, (www.deutschlandfunk.de/christen-und-die-afd-keine-pauschalverurteilung-der-100.html).

children must not become the plaything of the sexual inclinations of a loud minority at school."[18]

Until 2015, the Family Protection Initiative had organised the 'Demo for all' (*Demo für alle*), which arose in response to plans by the Baden-Württemberg state government to revise the education plan, including the thematization of sexual diversity, and fought against alleged 'early sexualisation' in schools and 'marriage for all' (*Ehe für alle*).[19] To this day, the Family Protection Initiative campaigns against "gender ideology" and the "sexualisation of children". Beatrix and Sven von Storch are also responsible for the so-called Christian Protection Initiative (*Initiative Christenschutz*). In one of their campaigns, they spoke of a "church cleansing wave against dissenters" with regard to the incompatibility decisions, according to which AfD members are no longer allowed to hold church offices in parts of the Protestant and Catholic churches.[20] With the three movements Civil Coalition, Family Protection Initiative and Christian Protection Initiative, Sven and Beatrix von Storch are still shaping a Christian fundamentalist network within and around the ranks of the AfD. Beatrix von Storch is also a member of the party's internal group Christians in the AfD.

The Protestant theologian Peter Dabrock summed up their work with reference to the above-mentioned draft programme: "The aspects of relying on and overthrowing a so-called traditional marriage, family, gender model can actually also be justified and motivated by religion on the one hand, just as at the same time this can also happen in a non-religious way"[21]. Following the CDU's modernisation under Angela Merkel, a "considerable part of the Christian-conservative milieu has become politically homeless"[22]. With its traditional view of the family, rejection of gay marriage, clearly defined gender roles and critical stance on Islam, the AfD became attractive to Christian conservative voters early on.

But who is this group? According to Andrea Althoff, 'Christian conservativism' is an "attitude that, analogous to political conservativism, seeks a return to the status quo ante, but in a religious meaning"[23]. It can be found among both Catholic and Protestant denominations and is characterized as an anti-liberal, anti-modern attitude: "Typical positions among conservative Christians are a defense of traditional gender roles; these include an emphasis on the importance of the traditional family,

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18 As cited in Brandes, *Christen und die AfD*.

19 Bednarz, L (2018), *Die Angstprediger. Wie rechte Christen Gesellschaft und Kirchen unterwandern*, München: Droemer, p. 67.

20 Initiative Christenschutz 2024, *Drohungen und Diffamierungen: AfD-treue Christen werden von den Kirchen wie Aussätzige behandelt*, viewed 12 September 2024, (https://www.christenschutz.de/drohungen-und-diffamierungen-afd-treue-christen-werden-von-den-kirchen-wie-aussaetzige-behandelt/).

21 As cited in Brandes, *Christen und die AfD*.

22 As cited in Brandes, *Christen und die AfD*.

23 Althoff, A (2022), *Right-wing populism and religion in Germany: Conservative Christians and the Alternative for Germany (AfD)*, in: Z Religion Ges Polit 2 (2018), pp. 335–363, p. 341.

an anti-homosexual stance, a rejection of same-sex marriages, (including child adoption by same-sex-couples), and opposition to abortion."[24]

Conservative Protestants, especially in the so-called free churches, are also often referred to as evangelicals. Frederik Elwert, Martin Radermacher and Jens Schlamelcher who published a comprehensive *Handbook of Evangelicalism* in 2017, point out the contradictory definition of this word: "Sometimes it implies radical conservatism, sometimes simply 'Protestant' in the broad sense, sometimes it refers to parishes, sometimes to loose networks and movements; there is even talk of evangelical Catholics."[25]

As indicated above, there is no doubt that there are overlaps between the attitudes of conservative Christians and the AfD. Althoff, however, also asks: Are the typical subjects mentioned above "placed on the agenda for the purpose of obtaining votes from conservative Christians" or can we speak of a "genuine alliance between right-wing political forces and conservative Christians"?[26]

A thesis paper by political scientists Oliver Hidalgo and Philipp W. Hildmann and sociologist Alexander Yendell, which was published by the Hanns Seidel Foundation in February 2019 and focuses on the "diffuse utilisation of the Christian religion by right-wing populists"[27], promises clarity. Three central theses are:

> Religion is a key issue in the political confrontation with right-wing populism: The observable overlaps in the agendas, programs and strategies of religious and right-wing populist actors represent a major political challenge. A successful closing of ranks with religion would promise right-wing populism an increase in legitimacy that could significantly benefit its goals.[28]
>
> The use of the Christian religion by right-wing populist actors is primarily for strategic reasons: Right-wing populist agitators instrumentalize Christianity in many ways. In the Alternative for Germany, for example, it is clear how the subgroup Christians in the AfD reflects the nationalist, anti-migration and Islamophobic attitudes of the party as a whole as a "cultural conservative" group.[29]
>
> The devaluation of Islam by right-wing populists with simultaneous reference to Christian values has emotional connotations and can therefore be explained in social-psychological terms: The topics of immigration and Islam are emotionally preloaded and therefore require a socio-psychological analysis of how collective prejudices and xenophobia arise. The scientific results are relatively clear: Islam- and Muslim-hostile attitudes can primarily be traced back to fears and feelings of threat in the majority population. In this context, the symbolic threat is particularly relevant:

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[24] Althoff, *Right-wing populism and religion in Germany*, p. 341.

[25] Elwert, F & Radermacher, M & Schlamelcher, J (2017), *Handbuch Evangelikalismus*, Bielefeld: Transcript, p. 11.

[26] Althoff, *Right-wing populism and religion in Germany*, p. 337.

[27] Hidalgo, O & Hildmann, PW & Yendell, A (2019), *Religion und Rechtspopulismus (Argumentation Kompakt 3/2019)*, München: Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, p. 1.

[28] Hidalgo & Hildmann & Yendell, *Religion und Rechtspopulismus*, pp. 1f.

[29] Hidalgo & Hildmann & Yendell, *Religion und Rechtspopulismus*, pp. 2f.

> Islamophobic people are preferably afraid that their own values and worldviews will be endangered and no longer culturally reproduced.[30]

The results so far suggest that the AfD has captured Christian issues purely for strategic reasons. The party itself sees things differently, of course.

5. The function of the Christians in the AfD and their criticism of the state and churches

Shortly before Christmas 2017, Alice Weidel, then co-chair of the AfD parliamentary group, claimed that her party was "the only Christian party left"[31]. She also sharply criticized the churches: "The separation of church and state is no longer respected. This means that, with a few exceptions, large parts of the churches are playing exactly the same inglorious role that they played in the Third Reich"[32]. Her statement was, among other things, a reaction to the then Berlin Bishop Markus Dröge who had previously stated about the AfD and its sub-group Christians in the AfD: "As a Christian, I cannot get involved in a party that dramatises fears, sows mistrust and preaches exclusion"[33].

The Protestant church historian Gerhard Lindemann who died in 2020 postulated in 2017:

> "AfD politicians also specifically campaign for their policies among Christians; within the party there is the 'Christians in the AfD' group, which is responsible for lobbying the churches, among other things. From this perspective, too, a look at the time of the National Socialist dictatorship and *its immediate history should be revealing*."[34]

Thuringia, which plays a central role in the AfD's young party history, is the country of origin of the German Christians (*Deutsche Christen*), a grouping within the Protestant Church that emerged during the final phase of the Weimar Republic. Its goal was to reshape the church in line with National Socialist ideology, to synthesize Christianity and National Socialism, and to provide a religious foundation for National Socialism. Within Protestantism, the so-called "German-Christian accompanying motif" was met with great sympathy.[35]

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30 Hidalgo & Hildmann & Yendell, *Religion und Rechtspopulismus*, pp. 4.

31 As cited in Odendahl, B 2017, *Kirche macht Fehler wie zur Nazi-Zeit*, viewed 12 September 2024, (www.katholisch.de/artikel/15912-afd-chefin-kirche-macht-fehler-wie-zur-nazizeit).

32 As cited in Odendahl, *Kirche macht Fehler wie zur Nazi-Zeit*.

33 As cited in Odendahl, *Kirche macht Fehler wie zur Nazi-Zeit*.

34 Lindemann, G (2017), 'Deutsche Christen? Historische Altlasten selbstkritisch reflektieren', in: Strubbe, SA (Ed.), *Das Fremde akzeptieren. Gruppenbezogener Menschenfeindlichkeit entgegenwirken*, Freiburg i. Breisgau: Herder, pp. 30–41, p. 30.

35 Lindemann, 'Deutsche Christen? Historische Altlasten selbstkritisch reflektieren', p. 31.

As early as October 1945, the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) issued its Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt (*Stuttgarter Schulderklärung*), which stated the following with regard to its own actions during the Nazi era:

> "We have indeed fought for many years in the name of Jesus Christ against the spirit that found its terrible expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; but we accuse ourselves of not having confessed more courageously, not having prayed more faithfully, not having believed more cheerfully and not having loved more ardently."[36]

In 1949, the Protestant Church was faced with the dual task of taking responsibility for its own past and coming to terms with it, while at the same time giving hope to the people in devastated post-war Germany. The lay movement *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* (DEKT) was founded as a political forum for the new Federal Republic of Germany.[37]

The participation of AfD member Anette Schultner, then chairwoman of the Christians in the AfD, in a panel discussion at the 36th DEKT in Berlin and Wittenberg in 2017 was the subject of controversy. President Christina aus der Au defended the decision under the title "We have to talk!": Never before in its history has the DEKT "tolerated racist or inhuman statements at its events"; this attitude has been a "fundamental substance" of the Kirchentag since 1949 against the background of the history of the Protestant Church in Germany.[38] On the AfD, however, she explained:

> "But I am firmly convinced that we have no alternative but to keep seeking dialogue. Where does it lead if we refuse to engage in dialogue with others? Can we want people who think differently – no matter how different they think – to be regarded as no longer worthy of a word? That we only talk about them, but no longer with them?"[39]

Yet, no more AfD representatives were invited to the 37th DEKT in Dortmund in 2019 or the subsequent church congresses; the organisers justified this decision by stating that the AfD had become massively radicalized in the meantime.[40] Schultner also left the AfD in 2017 – for the same reason. In an interview with the 'Tagesspiegel', she explained: "In family policy, the AfD has taken up positions that I, as a Christian, consider very important and that were not articulated in this way by the other previ-

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[36] Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 1945, *Stuttgarter Schulderklärung*, viewed 12 September 2024, (www.ekd.de/Stuttgarter-Schulderklarung-11298.htm).

[37] Busch, A (2017), 'Der Kirchentag als forum politicum der jungen Bundesrepublik', in: Ueberschär, E (Ed.), *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag. Wurzeln und Anfänge*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, pp. 147–168, 147.

[38] aus der Au, Ch (2017), 'Wir müssen reden!', in: Thielmann, W (Ed.), *Alternative für Christen? Die AfD und ihr gespaltenes Verhältnis zur Religion,* Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, pp. 77–85, p. 80.

[39] aus der Au, 'Wir müssen reden!', p. 82.

[40] Langer, A 2019, *Die AfD muss draußen bleiben*, viewed 12 September 2024, (www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/evangelischer-kirchentag-in-dortmund-die-afd-muss-draussen-bleiben-a-1273132.html).

ous nationwide parties" [41]. Her goal had been to "help build a conservative people's party in the AfD with a clearly recognisable Christian stamp".[42] In her representative role as chairwoman of the Christians in the AfD, however, she "felt less and less that I was actually able to adequately represent the people I was supposed to represent with my clearly conservative but moderate stance"[43].

This confirms those voices that have regarded the Christians in the AfD group as a "fig leaf" since its beginnings.[44] American cultural studies speak of tokenism when the process of representing an underrepresented group internally is perceived as impression management. The groups Christians in the AfD and also Jews in the AfD are therefore to be understood as tokens that are deliberately used to refute accusations of discrimination and disguise one's own anti-Semitic, Islamophobic and gender-hostile identity.

As a result of the nationwide protests against right-wing extremism that emerged from January 2024 following the 'Remigration' meeting in Potsdam, the two major Christian churches in Germany also substantiated their relationship with the AfD. In June 2024, for example, the regional synod of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland (*Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland*) emphasised that "the political principles of the AfD are not compatible with the fundamental values of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland".[45]

On 22 February 2024, the German Bishops' Conference (*Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*) published a declaration entitled "Ethnic nationalism and Christianity are incompatible", which also refers directly to the AfD, stating the following:

> "After several bouts of radicalisation, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is now dominated above all by a völkisch-nationalist mindset. [...] We say with all clarity: Ethnic nationalism is incompatible with the Christian image of God and man. Right-wing extremist parties and those that run rampant on the fringes of this ideology can therefore not be a place of political activity for Christians and are also not electable. Moreover, spreading far-right slogans – including racism and anti-Semitism in particular – is incompatible with full-time or voluntary service in the church."[46]

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41 As cited in Fiedler, M 2017, *AfD-Austritt: Da war das Maß voll* (viewed 12 September 2024, (www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/anette-schultner-afd-austritt-da-war-das-mass-voll/20460966.html).

42 As cited in Fiedler, *AfD-Austritt: Da war das Maß voll*.

43 As cited in Fiedler, *AfD-Austritt: Da war das Maß voll*.

44 cf. Langer, *Die AfD muss draußen bleiben*.

45 Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland 2024, *AfD-Grundsätze nicht mit Werten der Evangelischen Kirche vereinbar*, viewed 12 September 2024, (www2.ekir.de/aktuelles/A18B953520D44B3B-B03A09E2ECF5CE4A/afd-grundsaetze-nicht-mit-werten-der-evangelischen-kirche-vereinbar?ref=aHR0cHMlM0ElMkYlMkZ3d3cyLmVraXIuZGUlMkY=&ti=1).

46 Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2024, *Völkischer Nationalismus und Christentum sind unvereinbar*, viewed 12 September 2024, (www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2024/2024-023a-Anlage1-Pressebericht-Erklaerung-der-deutschen-Bischoefe.pdf).

After AfD representatives were again not invited to speak at the 103rd *Deutscher Katholikentag* from 29 May to 2 June 2024 in Erfurt, Joachim Kuhs, Protestant spokesperson for the Christians in the AfD, responded by referring to the *Barmen Theological Declaration*, which was published 90 years before. He wanted to "recommend it to our Catholic brothers", as the very first thesis is a "principle that urgently needs to be recalled in view of the danger of a globalist mix of religions"[47]. Kuhs summarized: "We – Christians of all denominations – need more courageous confession and no adaptation to political-ideological reveries. As Christians, we must stand up to the state when it disregards the rights of its citizens and wants to turn the churches into puppets of an un-Christian ideology."[48]

This case once again illustrates the perfidious tactics that the AfD has adopted to express its criticism of the state and the church. It repeatedly does not shy away from Nazi comparisons, equating itself with the Confessing Church and the current situation of state and church with that of the Nazi era. In the paper "Unholy Alliance. The Protestant Church's pact with the zeitgeist and the powerful", the Thuringian AfD parliamentary group misused the Confessing Church's demand "Church must remain Church" in 2019 for its cultural war against the Protestant Church in Germany, which it accuses of allying itself "with those in power and their ideology" and abandoning the Gospel.[49] The Thuringian AfD compared the *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (Bible in a just language) with the endeavours of Nazi Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller to adapt Bible texts in 1936 "to the National Socialist zeitgeist and its language".[50]

In an article for the online magazine 'Tichys Einblick', which is considered to be right-wing populist, the Protestant pastor Achijah Zorn who was obviously close to the AfD referred in his own way to the Bible passage quoted at the beginning of this article: "The Church of Jesus Christ prays like the tax collector: 'God be merciful to me a sinner' (Luke 18:13). The red-green milieu church prays like the Pharisee: 'God, thank you that I am not like the AfD over there' (Luke 18:11)."[51]

6. Practical example: Group-focused enmity in the AfD

The mechanism of group-focused enmity in the AfD can be illustrated with a practical example by analyzing an election poster for the 2017 federal election:[52]

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47 Christen in der AfD 2024, *Offener Brief an die Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*, viewed 12 September 2024, (https://chrafd.de/index.php/364-offener-brief-dbk-zu-erklaerung-feb24).

48 Christen in der AfD, *Offener Brief an die Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*.

49 AfD-Fraktion im Thüringer Landtag (2019), *Unheilige Allianz. Der Pakt der evangelischen Kirche mit dem Zeitgeist und den Mächtigen*, Erfurt, p. 5.

50 AfD-Fraktion im Thüringer Landtag, *Unheilige Allianz*, p. 20.

51 Zorn, A 2024, *Wie die rot-grüne Milieukirche die christliche Kirche zerstört*, viewed 12 September 2024, (www.tichyseinblick.de/kolumnen/vorwort-zum-sonntag/rot-gruene-milieukirche/).

52 The author and editors decided not to print the poster in order to avoid reproducing group-focused enmity. It can be viewed at this link: https://www.ndr.de/nachrichten/niedersachsen/Die-AfD-und-ihre-Positionen-zu-Frauen-und-Familie,afd3132.html

The poster shows a white woman lying down with her pregnant belly clearly visible under a short shirt. The focus on the pregnancy is supported by the poster's colour scheme. Above the woman is the lettering "'New Germans?' We make them ourselves!", whereby it is striking that only the first part "new Germans" is placed in inverted commas. The woman lies on the lower bar of the poster with the election campaign slogan "Take courage, Germany!" and the AfD logo.

Sexism and prejudice towards (Muslim) immigrants can be quickly recognised as elements of group-focused enmity. The fact that the "New Germans" are placed in inverted commas can also point to established privileges associated with reservations towards German citizens with a migration background. Isabel Heinemann analyzed the poster in detail and sees it as illustrating the image of the traditional family: "Rather openly, both the image and the subtitle referred to the classical tropes of the National Socialist cult of motherhood: blond, young, able-bodied maidens reproducing for the benefit of the German nation"[53]. Heinemann notices a "racially-defined notion of *Volk*, consciously repackaging terms from the 1930s for current political use", in which the "white healthy family" stands at the centre of its political programmatic and campaign iconography.[54] By presenting itself as a "true German 'pro-family' party", it becomes attractive to right-wing conservative Christian voters, even though it is more concerned with protecting the "German nation"[55].

Another election poster published by the AfD Magdeburg shows stereotypical German children in comic style, with the girls wearing long hair and dresses with a pink colour or floral pattern and the boys wearing short hair, yellow or blue T-shirts and trousers. The poster is dominated by the slogan "More children instead of mass immigration" with a pram attached to the word "children". In addition to the obvious prejudice towards immigrants, criticism of abortion is also expressed here, as in the example shown above – another core issue that links the AfD with the Christian right. Liane Bednarz says that abortion criticism is "increasingly hijacked by right-wing populist movements and parties that conflate German nationalist interests with the issue by deploring the abortion of 'German' embryos".[56] She refers to AfD slogans such as "A nation dies in the womb", the AfD's manifesto, and the election poster "More children instead of mass immigration" which promotes an "activating family policy" in favour of the "indigenous population"[57]. Bednarz also warns conservative Christians in particular against infiltration: "Christians, who regard every life that is about to be born as a creature of God, should be alarmed by such a conflation"[58].

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[53] Heinemann, I 2022, *Volk and Family: National Socialist Legacies and Gender Concepts in the Rhetoric of the Alternative for Germany*, viewed 12 September 2024, (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/16118944221110713?icid=int.sj-full-text.similar-articles.7).

[54] Heinemann, *Volk and Family*.

[55] Heinemann, *Volk and Family*.

[56] Bednarz, L (2019), *Für einen seriösen Lebensschutz*, in: APuZ 20/2019, pp. 29–31, p. 30.

[57] Bednarz, *Für einen seriösen Lebensschutz*, p. 30.

[58] Bednarz, *Für einen seriösen Lebensschutz*, p. 30.

7. Is religion a general problem?

Right-wing conservative Christians emphasise that they derive their often misanthropic positions from the Bible. Is (the Christian) religion with its claim to truth and its sexual morality possibly a general problem? The EKD survey "Between charity and demarcation" has interviewed self-declared members of the Protestant Church, the Catholic Church and people without religious affiliation. Members of Muslim communities, the Orthodox Church, Free Churches and other religious communities were excluded from the present analysis. One central result of the survey is:

> "As the centrality of religiosity increases, anti-Semitism, the devaluation of refugees, of Sinti and Roma, of the long-term unemployed, of persons with disabilities and of Muslims decline, and acceptance of democracy in Germany increases. In this respect, the centrality of religiosity has a positive influence on the establishment of a pluralistic and diverse society. […] Unfortunately, this positive finding does not apply to prejudices against diverse gender identities. The frequent closeness of religious people to traditional role models leads to a greater distance from queer gender identities, which in today's reading is referred to as sexism and homophobia."[59]

In conclusion: Protestant church members whose faith plays a central role in their lives show less prejudice in almost all fields of the analyzed forms of group-focused enmity (except sexism). They have less anti-Semitic resentment, are less likely to consider people of the Muslim faith to be criminals and are more open to the immigration of Muslims to Germany. Church members who are open to other religions are more protected from prejudice in almost all areas and show no above-average prejudice toward any group. Conversely, however, church members who are convinced that other religions are less true than their own have more prejudice in many fields.[60]

8. Conclusion

Religious othering and group-focused enmity can be seen as a global anti-globalist phenomenon associated with the rise of right-wing populism in the second decade of the 21st century. The central motive is fear of the other, which gives rise to common enemy images of conservative Christians and right-wing populism – they both share anti-liberal and anti-modern positions. The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is an example of this development. If the AfD presents itself as the only Christian party left, the use of religious themes by right-wing populism represents an appropriation for

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[59] Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (2022), *Zwischen Nächstenliebe und Abgrenzung. Eine interdisziplinäre Studie zu Kirche und politischer Kultur*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, p. 86.

[60] Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2023, *Ein Spiegelbild der Gesellschaft. Wie sich Mitgliedschaft in einer Kirche und Religiosität auf Vorurteile und die Einstellung zur Demokratie auswirken*, viewed 12 September 2024, (https://www.ekd.de/ein-spiegelbild-der-gesellschaft-72931.htm).

purely strategic reasons. It is striking how the AfD is trying to establish itself as a conservative protector of Christian values in opposition to the churches. It presents itself as the antithesis to the churches that follow the *Zeitgeist* in order to give its nationalist ideology a supposed biblical basis. The party does not shy away from Nazi comparisons, places itself in the tradition of the Confessing Church, and equates the behaviour of the church today with that of the Nazi era. An election poster has illustrated in an exemplary way that instead of religious reasons, German-national *völkisch* interests are decisive, while the EKD survey "Between charity and demarcation" has shown that religious people are even less susceptible to group-focused enmity – but this only applies within the EKD and the Catholic Church, not to the Christian Right.

Recent political events give further cause for vigilance – not least for Christians: CDU/CSU knowingly pushed through a draft on migration only with the votes of the AfD. 80 years after the end of the Nazi regime, democratic parties in the Bundestag thus deliberately passed a joint resolution with an extreme right-wing party. This is a breach of taboo. The outgoing Vice-Chancellor Robert Habeck but also the media rightly warned of a normalization of the AfD in the media and politics in the 2025 federal election.[61]

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[61] Schröder, S 2025, *Habeck kritisiert Normalisierung der AfD in Medien und Politik vor Bundestagswahl*, viewed 18 July 2025, (https://www.fr.de/politik/vor-bundestagswahl-habeck-kritisiert-normalisierung-der-afd-in-medien-und-politik-93584860.html); Langenau, L 2025, *Haben Medien die AfD normalisiert?*, viewed 18 July 2025, (https://www.sueddeutsche.de/medien/afd-rechtsextremismus-medien-tanjev-schultz-li.3209165).

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Ideological challenges of religious freedom to secular state politics and jurisprudence

Johan Temmerman

Abstract

In this contribution, I explore the difficulties in jurisprudence within secular society with regard to freedom of religion. To counter polarization and the accompanying secular and religious populism, I present arguments for taking a constructive stance on both sides of the philosophical spectrum. In doing so, religious traditions should install in their frames of mind the notion that jurisdiction protects the believer and does not pronounce on beliefs, traditions or institutions. The secular state, in turn, needs to understand that religious freedom makes people resilient, requiring them to protect even the most exotic beliefs, and to do so by adopting a non-identifying policy. In conclusion, these ideological nuances should allow for a broader acceptance of human rights and religious freedom in the future.

Keywords

Religious freedom, human rights, Political Theology

Introduction

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads:

> "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

Polarization

Religion in all its forms and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) have a troubled relationship. This is noticeable to an intensified extent in the attitude towards Article 18 that articulates the principle of freedom of religion. The basic human right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is not only a challenge for secular societies, but as a sting in the flesh of age-old traditions; it is also a challenge

for religions. Western culture in particular struggles with this basic right, for how can faith, traditionally seen as a vocation or destiny coming from God, be the object of human free choice? Theologically and epistemologically speaking, there is a conflict between revealed truth and between truth finding as the result of scientific research. Pope Pius IX, in his encyclical titled *Syllabus Errorum* (1864), condemned religious freedom as one of the eighty fallacies of modern liberalism. In the encyclical, we read that allowing people to choose their religion freely and as they see fit corrupts people's minds and morals: "Religious freedom spreads the plague of indifference."[1] This opposition to the right to religious liberty gripped the churches during the aftermath of the French Revolution and *Declaration des droits de l'homme et du Citoyen* (1789). Protestant churches and denominations also followed in this opposition to religious freedom. There were fears that if priority was given to individual rights, all deeper and religious beliefs would eventually disappear. Religious freedom was initially seen in religious circles as a danger to faith. After World War II, this changed. The Second Vatican Council and the rise of contextual theology, which integrated democratic acquired rights into Western culture, weakened the controversy, but it is easy to note until today that there is still a great tension between the basic principles of religions and universal human rights. In a moment, I will cite some examples from case law that illustrate this tension.

But secular societies and ideologies also struggle with religion in general and with the right to religious freedom in particular. Liberal democracies fear rising religiosity worldwide and, more specifically, the rise of Islam in the West. French political scientist and Arabist Gilles Kepel speaks of "*une revanche de Dieu*".[2] Secular ideologues ask how freedom of religion can be reconciled with the religious obligation to obey the laws of God or Allah over the laws of the land. In modern societies based on equality and freedom, how can jurisdiction allow groups to invoke archaic hierarchies and gender-exclusive norms to violate people's basic rights? Consequently, people on the liberal side fear as much as their religious fellow citizens that the right to religious freedom will eventually destroy the secular carcass of society.

Consequently, we see great scepticism on both sides of the philosophical spectrum regarding the right to freedom of religion. On both sides, religious freedom meets with suspicion. On the religious side, people fear the erosion of morality and tradition, while on the secular side, they fear the erosion of the secular legal order in a multi-religious society. This means that religious freedom is under pressure from both sides. The driver of the pressure is fear. The alternative advocated by both sides is a return: for religious believers to the moral precepts enshrined in sacred texts, and for secular ideologues to the charter of the French Revolution, which states that no

[1] Pope Pius IX (1864), *Syllabus Errorum*, §79, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm [accessed February 17, 2025]

[2] Gilles Kepel (1991), *La Revenche de Dieu: Chrétiens, Juifs et Muselmans à la Reconquête du Monde*, Paris: Seuil.

one should be harassed for his opinion, "not even a religious one".[3] Let me state explicitly here that these are the extremes of the philosophical perspective. Most people treat the basic right to freedom of religion with nuance and cherish this provision. But since the extremes form mainly out of fear, the danger lurks around the corner that as tensions in society increase, the recruiting momentum of self-preservation drives the nuanced middle apart creating a polarization between the preservation of tradition and values on the one hand and the struggle against ignorance and obscurantism on the other. Recent conflicts over religious freedom with regard to symbols in public buildings demonstrate the increasing polarization as well as legal impotence.

Examples

Let me give two examples which show that freedom of religion is differently applied in the jurisdiction of different nations: the so-called Crucifix II judgment in Germany and the Italian crucifix case. The Bavarian regulations for primary schools include the requirement that the religious education given to children by parents must be supported by the school. This may include prayer or worship and other matters. In Bavaria, traditionally, a crucifix hangs in every classroom in most schools. The parents of three children following Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical pedagogy objected to these crucifixes because it confronted the children with a coercive orientation towards traditional Christian religion. In their objection, freedom of religion was thus understood not only as the right to choose one's own philosophical interpretation but also on the guarantee not to be confronted with an influence contrary to one's own choice. The court ruled, after cumbersome reasoning, that the crucifixes had to be removed. After all, the crucifixes violate the philosophical and religious neutrality that the school is constitutionally required to guarantee. The court also ruled that parents' rights to a neutral education for their children had been violated. Implicitly, one could interpret this ruling as requiring the removal of all crucifixes in schools. There was great indignation in German public opinion regarding this ruling. German chancellor Helmut Kohl spoke of an "incomprehensible verdict".[4] Journalists and opinion makers wrote that the popular will was violated and that German Christian culture was in danger. The sustained vehemence of criticism made judges warn not to endanger the rule of law. The court eventually backtracked without losing face by

[3] *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*, Art. 10: "Nul ne doit être inquiété pour ses opinions, même religieuses, pourvu que leur manifestation ne trouble pas l'ordre public établi par la loi." https://www.elysee.fr/la-presidence/la-declaration-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-du-citoyen , accessed on April 23 2023.

[4] See the article in *Independent* from Friday 11 August 1995: "Kohl joins classroom war of religion. Crucifix ban: Chancellor accuses court of undermining Christian values," Online: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/kohl-joins-classroom-war-of-religion-1595816.html [accessed February 17, 2025].

reinterpreting the implicit removal of crucifixes in all schools and recommending the removal of crucifixes only in schools where parents request it.[5]

In stark contrast to this judgment is the Italian case on crucifixes in classrooms. In 2009 and 2011, the European Court of Human Rights considered a complaint by a Finnish mother of two children who attended school in Italy, being the home country of the children's father. Her complaint was more or less the same as the one by the German parents in Bavaria. The Italian court did not uphold the complaint citing a 1920 law that stated that secularism had become an integral part of European culture and Western democracy. The presence of crucifixes in a classroom did not detract from this. The Italian court called the crucifix a point of reference rather than a symbol of the Catholic religion. The children's mother went to the European Court where seven judges ruled that her complaint did have a legal basis, namely, the right to freedom of religion implying neutral education for children. The case was known as Lautsi v. Italy. Italy appealed and asked for a review of the ruling, supported by 20 European countries and a number of NGOs. After lengthy debates, the court decided to review the previous decision on the grounds that it is not up to a court to make philosophical decisions regarding public order and buildings because this belongs to the local jurisdiction. Removing the crucifixes comes across as a position choice pro-secularism. If the Italian Government believes secularism is part of the country's constitutional architecture, it should remove the crucifixes from classrooms. A court-ordered removal would be a positive and aggressive embrace of agnosticism and secularism and consequently anything but neutral.[6]

Populism

Both examples show that increasing polarization challenges the right to religious freedom as people also perceive jurisprudence as philosophical interpretation. Increasing philosophical diversity encourages religious and secular populism. I see a remarkable paradox in this context: the greater the diversity, the more intense the orientation towards the self.[7] Both religious and secular populism clouds the jurisprudence on religious freedom. Denying people a say and/or participation in public forums because they are considered stupid, naive or gullible, or condemning people or groups because of orientation or sexual preference have become commonplace. It

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[5] Donald Kommers (1997), *The Constitutional Jurisprudence of the Federal Republic of Germany*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 482-483. Comments and questions on the legal significance of this case, see W.C. Durham Jr. & B.G. Scharffs, *Law and Religion, National, International, and Comparative Perspectives*, New York: Wolters Kluwer, pp. 608–612. See also Kalman Pocza (2021), "The Bavarian Crucifix Case: One of the Biggest Crises of the Bundesverfassungsgericht" in Andreas Koltay (ed.), *Christianity and Human Rights. Perspectives from Hungary*, University of Public Service, p. 323–355).

[6] For a detailed analysis of this case, see Durham and Scharffs*, Law and Religion*, pp. 613–619.

[7] Johan Temmerman (2023), *The Paradox of Religious Populism. The Curious Case of Belgium*, ResearchGate, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.27612.67203.

shows that religious freedom is closely linked to freedom of expression. This obliges the judiciary to interpret ideology and/or sacred texts.

One example is the condemnation of Swedish pastor Åke Green who in 2002 disapproved of homosexuality during a sermon based on Bible texts. Pastor Green spoke of "abnormality", after which he depicted homosexuality as a perversion that eventually leads to pedophilia and bestiality: "homosexuality is a disease" said Green, which gives a good person a sick heart.[8] Green was convicted of agitation against a national and ethnic group. Interestingly, in the verdict, the court stated in its reasoning that Green's statements were not a direct reference to the Bible but an offensive judgement on a community at large. The sermon exceeded the bounds of objective and responsible discourse concerning gay people. The judgment further states that the preacher clearly intended to offend a community.

Legal anthropocentrism

The problem of religion and the organization of the state has long been a matter of debate. Already during the Middle Ages and especially the Enlightenment, people thought about the relationship between church and state. Roughly speaking, two views emerged: either one strives for a universal religion based on morality, to which everyone must profess (Cusanus, Rousseau, Voltaire), or the state imposes a standard of tolerance, whereby everyone must tolerate the faith of the other (Thomas Aquinas, John Locke). The creation of a moral unitary religion collides with the walls of plurality, as one must abandon one's own views in favor of unification. The duty of tolerance bumps up against dissent and discrimination. The human rights approach tries a third (new) path: namely, "a full embrace of diversity".[9]

The approach to the issue between religion and state organization that led to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is grounded in three basic principles:

1. Acceptance of the fact that all people hold irreconcilably different views on the ultimate meaning of life, both in terms of religious belief and happiness. The basic principle is: the plurality of worldviews is a fact.
2. The plurality of worldviews is seen as a treasure because wanting to bring all people under one philosophical denominator is not only utopian but also dangerous.
3. One emphasizes an overarching commonalit', valid in both secular and religious contexts; that is, without sharing the view, one still respects any founded belief. One encourages respect for human dignity rather than seeking to change or destroy views. In this context, one uses the term empowerment.

The method of defining human rights presents an additional difficulty with regard to religious freedom because it is not the religion whose freedom is guaranteed but the

[8] Durham and Scharffs, *Law and Religion*, p.200.

[9] H. Bielefeldt, N. Ghanea, and M. Wiener (2016), *Freedom of Religion or Belief. An International Law Commentary,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 9–10.

freedom of the believing person. In short, freedom of faith protects the believer rather than the faith. There is indeed an intertwining of the two, but the focus of human rights is on the individual so that freedom of assembly, organization, ceremonies etc. is granted indirectly, given that these freedoms arise only at the request of the believer. Hence, the endorsement of religious plurality precedes the demand for religious freedom.

This means that the court can never rule on the beliefs themselves but only on the individual's right to hold the beliefs. Specifically, this means that the right to freedom of belief does not protect traditions *per se* but the individual's free search and development of a faith-based identity. It is the person, the individual, who is central to human rights discourse and jurisdiction based on it. Consequently, criticism from religious quarters sounded sharp from the start. Pius IX denounced overly man-centred thinking reproachfully citing in his encyclical that "the perfection of man" on the basis of human reason is put above man "faith and divine revelation".[10] The pope was mistaken in thinking that human rights propagated an ideology, whereas one only laid down the fundamental right for the legality of human freedom. Hence, one can best summarize the human rights discourse as a legal anthropocentrism.[11] This orientation of the legal framework is necessary because one cannot guarantee philosophical plurality without focusing on the individual. But this does not mean that one can just propagate anything under this banner. There are limits, and these are drawn by the contours of the other's right. And this is where the religious cat on the tightrope comes in: for instance, does a gender-exclusive hierarchy go against the fundamental rights of human beings, in this case women? On the legal side, one will protect the right to hold this view, but indirectly one will not protect the hierarchy given that one violates the right of the female individual. Based on its legally anthropocentric orientation, the right to religious freedom makes a clear distinction between corporatist interests and individual rights.

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[10] Pope Pius IX (1864), *Syllabus Errorum*, §3 en §5, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius09/p9syll.htm [accessed February 17, 2025].

[11] The recognition of human rights as 'legal anthropocentrism' urgently needs to be placed on the theological agenda of all world religions, given the trend of growing religious populism cited above. Theological thinking traditionally assumes a God-centred worldview, in which the believer feels protected by God's will. Contextual theology, which gained ground during the second half of the 20th century, put minority rights high on the agenda. But at the forefront of the 21st century, the religious landscape was turning, not least under the pressure of increasing globalization that was preventing the equal distribution of wealth and resources in the world. From a theological perspective, radicalism increased, resulting in a wave of terror attacks during the first decades of the 21st century. This put pressure on the relationship between the rule of law and religious freedom. In this framework, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between religious populism and hate speech and between the legitimate expression of religious beliefs as identity markers. Consequently, the anthropocentric framework necessary to freely choose faith – if not one reduces faith to coercion which is contradictory to 'God's will' – is essential to combat radicalism and build a constructive theological discourse. See Johan Temmerman (ed.) (2021), *Religious Radicalism. Demarcations and Challenges*, Brussels: Academic and Scientific Publishers, pp. 20–22.

An example

In 2014, the US Supreme Court ruled in the case of Burwell v. Hobby Lobby. The crux of the case was whether religious liberty is violated when the government requires a company to provide health insurance for its employees in which contraception is reimbursed if the religious beliefs of the company management prohibit contraception? The background is the Affordable Care Act introduced in 2010 ,better known as Obamacare. It states that group and individual health insurers must include preventive care coverage including contraception for women. The law provides exceptions for religious institutions if they (1) aim to promote religious values, (2) employ employees of the same faith, and (3) are a non-profit organization. Thus, these exceptions do not cover businesses that have a religious background. Numerous lawsuits followed, including the case brought by David and Barbara Green against Obamacare. The Green family are Christians who opened a small shop 45 years ago that grew into a chain nationwide. It was an Arts and Crafts Store called Hobby Lobby, which grew into a chain of 500 shops and 13,000 employees in just decades. In their home state of Oklahoma, they are registered as a for-profit corporation. Their company description states that they are "honouring the Lord in all they do by operating the company in a manner consistent with Biblical principles". For instance, the chain closes its doors on Sundays thus losing millions in profit. The company also regularly buys newspaper ads calling on the American people "to recognise Jesus as Lord and Saviour". The Green family believes that life begins at conception and that their faith is violated when they allow people access to contraception. The company took the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to court demanding that contraception be removed from the provisions of Obamacare. In doing so, they invoked the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), enacted in 1993, which states that the government is prohibited from creating a substantial obstacle to a person practicing his or her religion if the obstacle created is the result of a general rule. The HHS argued that neither the company nor the owners could be heard by the RFRA, given they are a for-profit company and because the law targets the company and not the owners. The argument boils down to the fact that Obamacare guarantees the rights of individual religious freedom and not those of a corporation or a for-profit organization. According to the HHS, Hobby Lobby does not practice religion, and religious freedom is not a legally valid argument for non-compliance with the law on corporations. In non-profit companies, the exception does apply because their religious autonomy includes the exercise of individual religious freedom.[12] The Court said that the law

[12] Durham and Scharffs also mention a similar case of Jewish merchants in Philadelphia who closed their shops on Saturdays (Sabbath) but were also required by state law in Pennsylvania to leave their doors closed on Sundays. They, too, were forced to either give up the legal protection of the business for the sake of their religious freedom or follow the state law and give up their religious freedom. Again, the argument was that the law guarantees individual religious freedom and not that of a tradition or institution. Durham and Scharffs, *Law and Religion*, pp. 395–404.

was not the least restrictive way to ensure access to contraceptive care, noting that a less restrictive alternative was being provided for religious non-profits, until the Court issued an injunction three days later, effectively ending said alternative and replacing it with a government-sponsored alternative for any female employees of privately held corporations that do not wish to provide birth control.[13]

There are many more facets of this case we could discuss, but I give this example to illustrate the mechanism and methodology of human rights discourse regarding freedom of religion, being legal anthropocentrism.

Role and challenges of the state

It must be clear that the state cannot identify with one religion but must offer an open framework in which religious pluralism can unfold without discrimination. To do this, the state apparatus has a triple responsibility:

1. Respect: human rights are normative and precede the state's legislative and administrative organization. The challenge is unregistered religions that are often considered illegal, showing that the state places its provisions above human rights, which is discriminatory for religious minorities especially in education.
2. Protection: because human rights violations usually take place in the workplace or in the neighborhood escaping state control, the government should create mechanisms to protect religious minorities.
3. Fulfil: the state should provide opportunities for individuals to use or avail themselves of their human rights, i.e. facilitate legal access as well as encourage education and development and provide staff and premises.

The methodology that gave birth to human rights does not prescribe how one should organize the relationship between the state and religion but rather presents the government with the responsibility to counter discrimination. At the same time, it reminds people of faith of their right to freedom of religion, provided one embraces diversity theologically and practically.

A thorny issue in this context is the interpretation of the terms 'secularity' and 'neutrality'. The word 'secular' has a wide spectrum of meanings and interpretations ranging from a formal commitment to accept and treat all religions equally to a politics of conscious anti-religiosity. In short, secularity can be interpreted both exclusively and inclusively. Hence, the state must be careful to adopt a politics of non-identification. Human rights guarantee an open, fair and inclusive environment for all. An inclusive interpretation of secularity is not an end in itself but serves the realization of religious freedom. An exclusive interpretation is called 'secularism' and aims to remove religion, to which one develops political activism. A challenge for policymakers and politicians is to keep the distinction between 'political secularity' (inclu-

[13] For a detailed description and legal deliberation, see: https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/573/682/ [accessed February 17, 2025].

sive) and 'doctrinal secularism' (exclusive) clearly in mind in order to counter discrimination and a violation of human rights.[14]

The same distinction applies with regard to the term 'neutrality'. Some interpret neutrality as a hands-off attitude, arguing that the state should have nothing to do with religion. This interpretation shuns anything outside its own framework of meaning and risks ending up in anti-religiosity. Others see neutrality as value-free. The debate remains unsettled, which elicits still others to suggest abandoning the term *per se* with the postmodern slogan 'nobody is neutral' in the background. But what terminology one does want to use to encourage the guarantee of recognition and freedom of philosophy of life is equally unclear. I suggest using the term cautiously, taking care not to fall into hypocrisy or status quo, and thus using the word 'neutrality' to denote the normative aspiration to act fairly and inclusively.

Conclusion

The challenges posed by the right to religious freedom are significant on both sides of the philosophical spectrum within liberal democracies. Religious traditions need to install in their theoretical thinking the notion that jurisdiction for the sake of plurality protects the believer and only in a derivative or indirect sense the cult and the institution. The corporatism often displayed by religious leaders must be loosened by adopting the notion that religious freedom is not a danger of slipping into immorality but does meet the existential questions that believers are asking in a multi-religious world. For its part, the secular state needs to understand that religious freedom makes people resilient, facilitating even the most exotic beliefs, and it does so by adopting a non-identifying politics.[15] Added to this is the cultural-sociological observation that people who are in a position of belonging to a religious minority are much more prone to appreciate the value of religious freedom.[16] Since globalization means

[14] Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor elaborates a nuanced view of secular tendencies in the modern world. He sees how in Western culture all thinking beyond human unfoldment is disappearing, One thereby sees the possibilities of transcendental thought purely within the realm of the predictable. This is also the pre-eminent characteristic of autonomous humanism. How this often conflicts with religious views is regularly demonstrated in today's globalized world. Charles Taylor (2007), *A Secular Age,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[15] Resilience is the engine of humanity because the earliest philosophical artefacts of human civilization arose in the face of finitude. People developed rituals and precepts as a survival strategy. In religion, this strategy received an explanation. This meaning guaranteed survival and improved living conditions. The belief system made humans resilient against a threatening environment and taught humankind to live together in a just manner. This forms the engine of growing humanity. Johan Temmerman (2022), *Behoud het goede. Wat kennis van religie ons leert*, Brussels: Academic and Scientific Publishers, pp. 75–97.

[16] This observation is excellently described by the French philosopher and sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), who, as a Catholic in the 19th century during his study trip to the US, studied and greatly appreciated the secular constitution and religiosity, while Catholics in Europe vehemently opposed it on the basis of rejecting the ideas envisaged by the French Revolu-

that just about every religion somewhere in the world has fellow believers who have to live in oppression and discrimination, it should be possible to create a broader base of support for the acceptance of human rights and religious freedom.

I outlined the difficulties and complex legal considerations regarding freedom of religion in a philosophically diverse society. This showed that a pertinent global concern at this time is to maintain freedom of religion in the future. Using examples of recent case law, I pointed out some problem areas. The interpretation of key words in this debate is a prominent concern. At issue are the terms 'neutrality' and 'secularity'. Is it at all possible to be neutral? Is not everyone ideologically preoccupied if only because of the specific characteristic of being human? In a secular society, every human being is encouraged from birth and during upbringing to make rational choices. This includes the choice to believe. In a liberal society, no one is forced into a religion by the state. Family and group pressure from outside and the desire to belong from within are important factors determining the choice to believe. Hence, the philosophy that created human rights explicitly protects the right of the individual and not the institution or religion. Faith itself and the content of the articles of faith is not a point of deliberation in secular jurisprudence.

In this article, I illustrate this tension with the Bavarian and Italian lawsuits brought to remove crucifixes from public schools. In Bavaria, the courts wrestled with the limits of the right to freedom of religion. Does this basic right include the right not to be confronted with religious symbols? The competent court hesitated and weakened its original "yes" by adding "only if asked" to the ruling under pressure from political and public opinion. The Italian judicial body employed a semantic argument, stating that crucifixes are not symbols of the Catholic faith, but a point of reference leaving each school free to allow ornaments to be hung or removed. These completely different rulings on the same complaint should challenge both traditional religions and secular political decision-making to think clearly about religious diversity in a liberal society.

In conclusion, I would like to make some suggestions to stimulate the debate on the place of religious doctrine and theology in a diverse society. Underlying the social and legal tensions surrounding religious diversity is the mistrust of traditional religions toward modern science. In the article, the Pope's resistance is exemplified as an illustration of the religious distrust of science. The resistance is grounded in a different epistemology, on the one hand, and the criticism of individualization, which in the eyes of the faithful is a slippery slope toward immoralism, on the other. I hold both areas of conflict up to the light.

1. The epistemological problem between religion and science is grounded in the concept of revelation. The doctrine of faith holds that God bestowed truth, through the mediation of the prophets, on humankind. This truth comes "straight from above" (K. Barth) and is completely alien to what a person can acquire on the basis of common sense, rational reasoning and trial and error. Since human

tion. Tocqueville praised the secular constitution and freedom of religion installed by the US. A. de Tocqueville (1835), *Democracy in America,* New York: Barnes and Nobles, 2003.

rights are a human invention – for radical believers this also applies to civil law – they are subordinate to the law revealed by God. It is therefore necessary, in my view, to reconsider the concept of revelation theologically. The starting point for this is the observation that the conceptual understanding of revelation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam was structured and delineated in the course of history. Rabbinic Judaism does not regard Jesus as the Messiah and certainly not as God become human, while believing Jews and Christians do not regard Muhammad as the final and ultimate prophet who completed what Abraham, Moses and Jesus began. The concept of revelation in the respective monotheistic traditions is a derivative of the ancient concept from the mythological cultural stage of humanity and was employed as an identity marker in the course of cultural development. It is, therefore, a global concern to interpret this development theologically as such and preserve its emancipatory power but redefine its content. Illustrative is the example of the Green family of the American chain Hobby Lobby. They believed that God forbade contraception based on the interpretation of Bible texts supplemented by a deeply ingrained Puritanism characteristic of American Evangelicals. Liberal legislation that provided health care, including birth control, the right of decision to the individual (woman) had to cave in and provide an alternative based on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993. However, it is perfectly possible for monotheistic traditions to appreciate the mythological nature of the concept of revelation as such and, through critical hermeneutics, to try an interpretation that does justice to tradition while responding to the global concern of justice. The epistemological challenge that religious diversity presents to religion one theology lies in the redefinition of the concept of revelation.

2. The problem of individualization and perceived immoralism has to do with the view of humanity that is prevalent in traditional religions and appears to be a residue from the ancient world. I described in the article the basis of human rights as being a legal anthropocentrism. Traditional religions hold a theocentric worldview, in which humans are subordinate to God in all facets of existence. How can legal anthropocentrism be reconciled with a theocentric worldview? To shape this, we return once again to the redefinition of the concept of revelation suggested above. In view of the appreciation of the individual in traditional religion, I suggest interpreting revelation as the insight of truth that animates life linearly from within. This implies a resilient and self-aware individual. Of this, the Bible and tradition testify. If one nevertheless obstinately continues to apply the ancient religious view of humanity as a subordinate being in the modern secular world, the believer risks denying the development of humanity and degenerating into an isolated and embittered existence. And precisely this attitude characterizes individualism at its best: engaging only with people like you while allowing others to perish. It is precisely this attitude that encourages immoral behaviour. We noted in previous research that it only takes a crisis on three levels (personal, social and global) to incite such an embittered and isolated person to radicalism and terror.[17]

[17] Johan Temmerman (ed.), *Religious Radicalism. Demarcations and Challenges*, p.22.

Hence, it is of an utmost global importance that theology and the humanities bridge the gap between them and the vibrant inner world of people so that the need for unity and reconciliation is marked and recognized.

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Building bridges: Religion's role in fostering ecological connection and resilience

Kelly Keasberry

Abstract

This essay explores the intersection of religion, ecology, and public life arguing that addressing the complex ecological crisis requires a collective effort that includes not only scientists, governments, and other stakeholders but also religious communities. It highlights the often overlooked potential of religious traditions to contribute to ecological resilience by offering wisdom, fostering community, and installing a sense of responsibility toward the earth. The contribution emphasizes the importance of bridging the gap between the public sphere and faith communities through interfaith dialogue and cooperation. By promoting mutual understanding and collaborative action, religions can play a crucial role in developing holistic approaches to environmental stewardship thereby enhancing societal resilience in the face of global ecological challenges.

Keywords

Ecological Resilience, Religion and Ecology, Interfaith Dialogue, Interreligious Dialogue, Environmental Stewardship, Public Sphere and Religion, Secularism and Religion, Sustainability, Collective Action, Holistic Approaches, Religious Communities, Climate Crisis, Social Responsibility, Ecotheology, Global Challenges, Spirituality and Environment

Introduction

Today, theology is more necessary than ever – but not in its traditional form, confined within ecclesial walls and church doctrine. While this conventional approach may offer security and uphold ancient hierarchies, it is rapidly losing relevance in an increasingly pluralistic and diverse world. At the same time, we face immense challenges from a multifaceted ecological crisis, including climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution of air, water, and soil, and the depletion of natural resources. These crises are deeply interconnected reinforcing one another and posing serious risks to life on Earth and the stability of our societies. Finding sustainable solutions that address both present issues and the well-being of future generations is crucial. The ability to respond resiliently to ecological shocks – by anticipating, adapting, and recovering – is vital.

The challenge for theology is to broaden its horizons. What we need is a theology with vision – one that moves beyond the blind repetition of outdated ideas and makes space for innovation and new perspectives. Fresh insights are essential to adequately address contemporary problems. Theologians from diverse backgrounds can take inspiration from the blind man of Jericho who cries out in longing: "Rabbi, I want to see" (Mark 10:51).[1] Vision enables us to bring change to a broken world crying out for restoration. It prevents us from becoming stagnant and stuck in dogma and tradition.

Theology today must be creative, visionary, innovative, and unifying. It needs to have the courage to break away from conventional paradigms, remain open to new ideas, and be constantly evolving. Most importantly, it should actively seek connection with others. As Jean-Pascal van Ypersele stated at the 2022 climate conference of the United Protestant Church of Belgium: "The situation is extremely serious, but there is still hope."[2] The key to change lies within us, in the renewal of our thinking.

Ecological awareness is essential for collectively addressing the challenges we face. Bridge building, dialogue and cooperation are indispensable paths towards that goal. We have entered a phase of transition, the end of the era of the major world religions, as I will explain in more detail in this essay. If theology is to remain relevant in light of these developments, reorientation is inevitable.

This study centers on a key question: how can religion play a constructive role in the challenges we face and even become a catalyst for resilience and change? Additional research questions include: What is resilience? What kind of resilience is needed to confront the ecological crisis? And how can we overcome the barriers of religious exclusivism and secular discomfort?

This article is divided into three sections:

1. The relationship of religion to the multiple ecological crisis. – Exploring how religions can contribute to understanding and addressing ecological challenges.
2. Religion: From root cause to solution? – Exploration of how religions can serve as a solution and not just a root cause of problems.
3. Opportunities and challenges of religions in a secular and super-diverse society. – Analysis of how religions can find and strengthen their role in a diverse, secular society.

In this contribution, we will examine the concepts of resilience, explain its importance in dealing with ecological crises, and explore the role of interfaith dialogue in fostering resilient communities.

[1] New International Version.

[2] Keasberry, K (2024), *Geworteld in verbinding. Een ecologische theologie voor de toekomst*, Antwerpen/Apeldoorn: Garant, pp. 24.

1. The relationship of religion to multiple ecological crises

The book *Geworteld in Verbinding* (Kelly Keasberry, 2024) describes how Boniface, when he struck his axe into the trunk of the Donar Oak, dealt a decisive blow to the animistic worldview. Before Christianization, humans had always believed in an animated world. Stories about sacred trees and river spirits had, for centuries, helped prevent the destruction, exploitation, and pollution of nature. People did not see themselves as separate from the world but as part of a vast, living whole. With the arrival of Christianity, this gradually changed. The animistic worldview gave way to a theological paradigm in which the earth was created for humanity –and humanity alone.

In 1967, historian Lynn Townsend White Jr. delved into the historical roots of the ecological crisis. In his groundbreaking report "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" he came to a striking conclusion: "Particularly in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever known."[3]

According to White, under the influence of Greek thought, a dualistic way of thinking emerged – one in which humanity was not only separate from creation, but God was also seen as entirely distinct from the world. People started to view God as superior (transcendent) and wholly different. For centuries, far less attention was given to God's immanence – the active force that fills the cosmos, sustains it, and gives rise to all galaxies, planets, and life forms.

In his critical analysis, White argues that these developments laid the foundation for an anthropocentric and materialistic worldview, one in which humans felt entitled to use and exploit nature as they saw fit. The transition from animism to Christianity coincided with the rise of a hierarchical view of creation, in which God stood above humanity, and humanity stood above the rest of creation.

1.1. Interpretations of Gen 1 and the ecological crisis

The role of religion in the ecological crisis remains widely debated. Gen 1:26-28 is frequently cited as a text that has contributed to an anthropocentric worldview. It reads:

> "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‚Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'[4]

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[3] White LT (1967), 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science*, New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767, pp. 1203–120.

[4] Genesis 1:26, in: Biblica, 2018. *New International Version (NIV)*.

A one-sided emphasis on the Hebrew terms radah (רָדָה, "rule") and kabash (כָּבַשׁ, "subdue") has reinforced a hierarchical conception of the world, where humanity is positioned above creation with a divine mandate to dominate and exploit the earth. White (1967) underscores that this interpretation has deeply influenced Western theology and philosophy. Especially in an era of an ecological crisis, however, it is crucial to recognize that this reading is only one of many possible interpretations of Genesis 1.[5] The following three perspectives offer alternative ways of understanding the creation narrative and humanity's responsibility within it.

1.1.1. Stewardship and responsibility

Within Jewish and Christian traditions, some interpretations stress the responsibility to protect creation. The concept of stewardship suggests that humanity is not the owner of the earth but rather a caretaker accountable for its well-being. This aligns with Gen 2:15, where humans are called to work in and take care of the garden.[6] The idea of stewardship is advocated by many theologians such as Richard Bauckham. In his book *Bible and Ecology*, he argues that this reading corrects the misconception that Gen 1 promotes domination. Instead, he asserts that the biblical text presents humanity as an integral part of the ecological system, bearing responsibility for the flourishing of creation.[7]

1.1.2. Royal governance as caring leadership

Moreover, some biblical scholars argue that the Hebrew term *radah* does not necessarily imply oppressive rule but rather refers to royal governance. This interpretation is rooted in an intertextual approach. In Psalm 72, for example, the king's authority is characterized by justice and care for the vulnerable, which suggests that ruling in Gen 1 is more about responsibility than domination.[8] J. Richard Middleton is a key proponent of this view asserting that the *imago Dei* (image of God) in Gen 1 indicates that

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5 White, Lynn. 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.' *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, 1967, pp. 1203–1207.

6 Genesis 2:15, King James Version: "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it."

7 Bauckham, Richard. *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*. Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010; cf. The Laudato Si' Integral Ecology Collection, https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/58954/external_content.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 20.02.2025).

8 Bauckham, Richard. *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation*. Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010; cf. The Laudato Si' Integral Ecology Collection, https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/58954/external_content.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 20.02.2025).

humans are meant to reflect God's benevolent kingship over creation, rather than exploit it.[9]

1.1.3. Relationship between humanity and creation

A third approach, prevalent in eco-theological and feminist interpretations, challenges the traditional concept of dominion as domination. Instead, it emphasizes the profound interdependence between humanity and nature. Theologian Sallie McFague advocates for moving beyond hierarchical dualisms envisioning a world in which God, humans, and nature exist in dynamic mutuality.[10] In a similar vein, Jürgen Moltmann offers a panentheistic perspective affirming that God is present within creation. He argues that recognizing humanity's deep ecological interconnectedness is essential for nurturing a more sustainable and just world.[11]

1.2. Genesis and contemporary ecological crisis

Although White's conclusions have faced criticism, he effectively highlights a key issue: theology is about more than just a historical or mythical narrative. Our interpretation of texts shape our attitudes toward the natural world. In sum, the way biblical texts are understood carries significant implications for environmental ethics and ecological responsibility.

By acknowledging diverse interpretations of Gen 1, theology can move beyond a narrow anthropocentric perspective and uncover resources within religious traditions that advocate for sustainability and environmental care. Many efforts have already been made since White published his thought-provoking essay. Contemporary theological movements increasingly emphasize the responsibility and stewardship embedded in biblical texts. Rather than reinforcing human supremacy, Gen 1 can be read as a call to ecological awareness, recognizing that humanity exists within creation rather than above it.

1.3. The multifaceted nature of our crisis

Today, partly thanks to the developments in technology and science, we can view our reality with a broader vision. Seen from space, the Earth is a celestial body with green, blue, and brown hues veiled by white clouds. This impressive pearl follows a small

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[9] Middleton, J. Richard. T*he Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Brazos Press, 2005, p. 50–55.

[10] McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Fortress Press, 1993; Keasberry, Kelly. 'Life Abundant. De ecologische Theologie van Sallie McFague', FPTR Brussel, 15 December 2021.

[11] Moltmann, Jürgen. *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*. SCM Press, 1985; Kay, William K. 'God in Creation: a reflection on Jürgen Moltmann's theology', in: Rural Theology 3(2):75-84, Wrexham University, January 2005.

orbit in a vast universe containing around 100 billion galaxies, each with billions of stars. We humans are inhabitants of one home, members of one finite, closed life system.

According to modern science, our planet was formed about 4.5 billion years ago, and life appeared approximately a billion years later. Plants began to appear around 600 million years ago, followed shortly by animals. Human consciousness did not emerge until around two million years ago. The biosphere existed long before us, and its complexity has been understood by biologists only since the 20th century. It is arrogant on our part to think that the Earth exists solely for our use or that the salvation of this immense and vast universe depends solely on the eight billion people who inhabit our planet.[12]

Our history as humanity shows that for the past 10.000 years, we have been the protagonists of wars and massacres, of the exploitation of nature, and of the disregard for living creatures. Scientists generally agree that the current multiple ecological crises are primarily the result of human actions. For the first time in history, we humans are responsible for the rapid degradation of planet Earth in its biophysical composition.

The current crisis is often characterized as a climate crisis, but in reality, the problem is much broader. We are not dealing with separate, isolated crises but with a single global ecological crisis where various aspects converge. The "Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change" (IPCC) describes this crisis as a complex web of interconnected factors manifesting in various facets of society. One key concept helps us to understand and address this crisis: connection.[13]

At its core, the multifaceted crisis revolves around how humanity relates to its environment. The problems we face stem from a fundamental disconnection. According to philosopher Ullrich Melle (KU Leuven), this rupture extends across three domains: the relationship between human society and non-human nature, the internal relationships among people, and the relationships between human collectives. All these domains are interconnected and influence one another.[14] How can this fracture be healed? What does it mean to return to the roots, to cleanse and restore them?

Rooted in anthropocentric and dualistic frameworks, theology has long contributed to the disenchantment of the world replacing sacred interconnectedness with a rigid creation hierarchy. In the face of today's planetary crises, a more holistic theological vision is urgently needed.

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[12] García Peredes, JCR (2015), 'Only Wholeness is Sacred. Towards a New Theological Vision', Madrid: University of Madrid, pp. 2, Available at Academia: https://upsam.academia.edu/José CristoReyGarc%C3%ADaParedes?swp=tc-au-16958622 [Accessed 18 August 2024].

[13] IPCC (2022), *Migration of Climate Change*, Sixth Assessment Report, in: Keasberry K (2024), pp. 25.

[14] Melle U (1992), 'De meervoudige ecologische crisis en de noodzaak van een drastische ommekeer', *Ethische Perspectieven* 3 (2), pp. 62.

1.4. Return to oneness

This essay begins with an ecological and planetary vision that views the universe as a unified whole with a God both immanent and transcendent – pervading and surpassing the cosmos (panentheism) – where everything is interconnected and interdependent. To illustrate this dynamic: our bodies are largely composed of water and are dependent on it. The water we drink is drawn from the ecosystem and is part of an ongoing, ancient cycle. It has flowed through rivers, evaporated into clouds, and returned to the earth as rain. Pollution of surface water is therefore not merely a local issue but impacts the entire ecosystem and the health of future generations.

Ecological theology is a profound invitation for modern humans to become aware of their deep unity with their Creator, with themselves, with others, and with all living beings. This awareness is often referred to as ecological conversion.

2. Religion: from cause to solution?

Living together with those who differ from us is not just a problem in war-torn regions around the world, in emerging democracies, or in old dictatorships. The challenge of coexistence is also present in Europe. It takes on different characteristics everywhere, but it is crucial for national institutions, religions, politics, and relationships between peoples.

In recent decades, the religious landscape in Western Europe has undergone major changes. Many Europeans no longer regard themselves as practicing Christians. Although the degree of secularization and its characteristics vary from country to country, it is clear that individualism has left its mark on all areas of life and has significantly weakened religious institutions. At the same time, particularly in Western European cities, there has been a shift from relative homogeneity to superdiversity. Global cities like Amsterdam and Brussels each offer home to around 180 nationalities.[15] While church attendance among the native population has declined and pillarized society has eroded, other forms of religion and spiritual expression are on the rise.

The rapid changes in Western society over recent decades have raised crucial questions such as: Is it possible to coexist with people who are so different from one another? On March 22, 2016, Belgium was rocked by horrific attacks at Zaventem airport and Maelbeek metro station. The attacks claimed the lives of 35 people: 16 at Zaventem airport and 16 at the Maelbeek subway station in Brussels. An additional three victims succumbed to their injuries in the months and years following the attacks which were found to be inspired by a radical and violent interpretation of Is-

[15] Kalsky, M. et al., 2020. *Fulness of Life and Justice For All: Dominican Perspectives*. Adelaide: ATF Theology, pp. 14; Close P (bourgmèstre), [no date]. 'Brussels', *Eurocities*, Available at: https://eurocities.eu/cities/brussels/#:~:text=With%20residents%20from%20184%20different,multicultural%20places%20in%20the%20world. [accessed 18 August 2024].

lam.[16] These attacks have fueled growing discontent. Tensions between communities have become more prevalent, and the concept of a multicultural society is facing increasing strain. How can we truly live together? How can we build bridges between these conflicting identities, overcoming polarization and perhaps finding common ground to tackle the major challenges of our time?

As Karl Popper (1902–1994), one of the 20th century's greatest philosophers of science, stated: "Optimism is a moral duty." He did not intend this as a call to naively overlook the complex realities we face but rather as a form of constructive realism – where opportunities are identified and harnessed, and human resilience is activated and strengthened.

In today's Western world, religion is often portrayed as a threat to society and blamed for many evils of this world such as major world wars, totalitarian regimes and ecological disasters. While it is undeniable that religions have not always had a flawless record, does the assumption that the world would be better off without religion truly hold up? Or could religion also serve as a positive catalyst for change?

When examining the five deadliest wars in history – World War II (1940–1945), the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), the transition from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty (1618–1683), the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), and World War I (1914–1918)[17] – we find that while these conflicts collectively caused approximately 167 million deaths, religion played a central role in only the Taiping Rebellion. Most wars are, in fact, driven by other factors such as imperial ambitions, nationalism, alliances, the "clash of civilizations", political-ideological differences, and military expansion.

The role of religion in human history is both complex and ambiguous. Religious visions of the present and future have, for centuries, inspired both the worst and the noblest aspects of human behavior. Religion inspired Michelangelo and Johann Sebastian Bach to create some of the most beautiful art in history, but it also fueled the Crusades, horrific instances of sexual abuse, and the tragic deaths of indigenous children separated from their families and dying in reeducation institutions. This duality illustrates the complex nature of religion: it has the power to both alienate and unite people. And despite Max Weber's secularization thesis, religion is here to stay.

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[16] De Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers, 'Onderzoekscommissie Terroristische Aanslagen 22 maart 2016', https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/attentats/brochure_terreuraanslagen.pdf (accessed 20.02.2025); Van den Berghe, Caroline; Dumarey, Alexander. 7 jaar geleden lieten 35 slachtoffers het leven bij de aanslagen van 22 maart, dit is hun verhaal, VRT Nws, July 25 2023, https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/07/25/ter-nagedachtenis-van-de-35-slachtoffers-die-het-leven-lieten-ti/#:~:text=Exact zeven jaar geleden kwamen,officieel erkend als dodelijk slachtoffer. (Accessed 20.02.2025).

[17] Cerda Brandon. *Top Twelve Most Deadly Wars in History*, The Borgen Project, March 25, 2018, https://borgenproject.org/top-12-deadliest-wars-in-history/ (accessed 20.08.2024).

2.1. Western Europe and the transformation of religion

Despite the decline in church attendance, the secularization thesis – which predicted the gradual fading of religion in the face of modernity – has proven outdated. Religion persists, but it has evolved into new forms. Even in secularized societies, religion has not disappeared; instead, it has undergone a transformation. The boundaries between different worldviews have become more fluid. In his farewell address, Dutch sociologist Staf Hellemans depicted a rise in spirituality that transcends denominational boundaries and traditional dogmas.[18]

By combining elements from various religions, religious bricolage and transreligious identities are on the rise. In theology and religious studies, this phenomenon is often referred to as "multiple religious belonging" (MRB). According to Dominican theologian Manuela Kalsky, about a quarter of the Dutch population in 2020 could be considered religious hybrids.[19] Unlike unaffiliated spiritual individuals, this group still maintains a certain connection to established religion. Religious hybrids no longer limit themselves to a single religion, however, they create a personal path of meaning by combining elements from different religions and traditions. Here is an example: Two paramedics at a Flemish hospital shared that they meditate five times a day aligning their meditation routine with Islamic prayer times as closely as possible. "We no longer pray in the traditional Islamic way," one explained, "but Islam encourages us to engage in reflection and contemplation. Our work is very stressful, and without this practice, we probably wouldn't cope."[20] Although these paramedics still identified as Muslims, their experience of religion had undergone a transformation that helped them navigate the daily challenges of their work.

Religious hybridization is not limited to Europe but is visible globally. For example, a childless Hindu woman shared that she had placed a statue of Jesus on her home altar after a Christian friend's wish to have a child was fulfilled. She explained that if Shiva did not hear her prayers, perhaps Jesus would. In Bali, Indonesia, one might find Buddha statues in Hindu temples. With the local Hindu community's consent, the Chinese community also uses these sacred spaces.[21]

Religious hybridization is dynamic, not static like a church creed; it evolves with individuals and their personal development.[22] As Hellemans pointed out in his farewell lecture, the issue is not that religion is disappearing, but that it is transforming. This shift has led to a redefined role for the church. In predominantly Catholic Belgium where religion and spirituality once overlapped almost entirely, religion is now a smaller circle within the broader circle of spirituality. Furthermore, the circle of

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[18] Cf. Hellemans, S (2019) 'De Grote Transformatie van Religie en van de Katholieke Kerk', Tilburg: *Tilburg University*.

[19] Kalsky, M et al. (2020), *Fulness of Life and Justice For All: Dominican Perspectives*, Adelaide: ATF Theology, pp. 18–20.

[20] Keasberry K (2023), Conversation in AZ Monica Deurne [Pastoral Care].

[21] Ketut (2024), Explanation on Bali [Travel guide].

[22] Kalsky, M et al. (2020), *Fulness of Life and Justice For All: Dominican Perspectives*, Adelaide: ATF Theology, pp. 18–20.

religion has become pluralistic, and the once-dominant church is now just one player among many in a wide array of options.

2.2. Religion and ecological awareness

This does not mean that religion no longer plays a role. As White argued, religious conceptions of the world and the cosmos underpin many of the beliefs we still hold today, often unconsciously. Our treatment of the planet and the ecosystem is deeply rooted in the beliefs humanity has adopted about its own essence, purpose, and relationship to the world. If the root cause of many ecological crises lies in religious attitudes, then a significant part of the solution must also be found within religion itself. Theologians who reinterpret ancient texts emphasizing ecological perspectives in Scripture and adopting a more holistic view can be catalysts for change.

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls for an ecological conversion – a recognition that everything is interconnected and that humanity is not above the ecosystem or the cosmos but is an integral and inseparable part of it.[23]

The necessary paradigm shift – from thinking in dualisms and separate domains to a consciousness of unity – has profound implications for how humanity relates to the world. As White pointed out, the history of Western Christianity has largely focused on God's transcendence, but less attention is given to God's immanence. In this dualistic view, humanity saw itself as separate from the Creator and from the natural world. Both Pope Francis and eco-theologians like McFague and Trees van Montfoort argue that ecological conversion is crucial for building bridges between religions and enhancing resilience in the face of current climate challenges.

Ecological conversion involves a profound transformation in humanity's relationship with nature. It requires a shift in mindset – from viewing the Earth merely as a resource to be exploited, to recognizing it as a sanctuary to be safeguarded. This perspective goes beyond traditional religious boundaries, highlighting a collective responsibility and a deep sense of care for our planet.

McFague proposes a panentheistic vision: God is the constitutive and animating force permeating and sustaining the entire cosmos. Unlike in pantheism, however, God is always greater than the cosmos and does not merge with it.[24]

This belief – that the divine is present in everything and permeates the world – reinforces interfaith connections by recognizing that each religion, at its core, acknowledges the sanctity of creation. Ecological awareness creates a common language and ethic that enables religious communities to collaborate, strengthen resilience, and take collective action against climate change. It bridges theological differences and provides a spiritual foundation for sustainable development and environmental protection.

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[23] *Laudato Si* (2015). Cf. McFague, Sallie. Life Abundant (2001), Van Montfoort, Trees. Groene Theologie (Skandalon, 2001).

[24] Cf. McFague, S (2001), *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press.

2.3. Resilience: a process, not an inherent trait

Resilience is often understood as the capacity of an individual, community, or ecosystem to recover from and adapt to stress and adversity.[25] Over the past forty years, the concept of resilience has evolved significantly. Initially, the focus was on the indestructibility of the individual but more recently, resilience research has embraced a broader perspective that also emphasizes the role of external factors.

Psychologists have found that resilience is not an inherent trait but rather a dynamic process shaped by the environment and circumstances in which an individual or community exists. This shift has led to a more holistic understanding of resilience, one that acknowledges the role of social, economic, and cultural factors alongside personal characteristics.

According to Rutter and Garmezy et al., there are three levels of protective factors that contribute to resilience: the individual, the family, and the community. This means that resilience is not solely dependent on personal qualities but also on the support and resources available within one's social network and broader community. Recent research has highlighted resilience as a characteristic of communities and cultural groups, which is crucial for understanding resilience in the context of today's ecological challenges.[26]

The current ecological crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and the destruction of natural habitats, require a resilient approach. Resilient communities have the capacity to effectively adapt to changing environments and cope with the stress of ecological disruptions. This ability to adapt and recover can be a determining factor in how well a community handles the challenges brought about by ecological crises. Research has identified several key characteristics of resilient communities:

- Strong social networks: Communities with robust social networks are better equipped to provide support and assistance during crises. Networks foster collaboration and solidarity, which in turn enhances collective resilience.
- Effective leadership: Leaders play a vital role in mobilizing resources, coordinating aid, and guiding communities through crises. Resilient communities are led by individuals who can offer vision and direction during tough times.
- Access to resources: Communities with access to economic, educational, and technical resources are better able to adapt and recover. These resources can range from financial support to knowledge and technology.

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[25] Luthar, S.S. & Cicchetti, D (2000), 'The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work', *Child Development*, 71(3), pp. 543–562. In: Fleming, J. & Ledogar, RJ, 2008. Resilience: An evolving concept: A review of literature relevant to Aboriginal research. *Primatisiwin*, 6 (2), pp. 7–23. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2956753/ [accessed 21 August 2024].

[26] Ibid.

- Cultural and social cohesion: Communities with a strong cultural identity and social cohesion tend to collaborate more effectively and achieve collective goals, which strengthens resilience against ecological and social shocks.[27]

The resilience-based approach to ecological challenges underscores that resilience is not simply an individual trait but a collective process shaped by the interactions between individuals, communities, and their environments. By focusing on these four key areas – strong social networks, effective leadership, access to resources, and cultural and social cohesion – faith communities can play a pivotal role in building resilience.

2.4. The role of interfaith dialogue in fostering resilience

Resilient communities are vital to a resilient society. By promoting values such as stewardship, a sense of community, and long-term thinking, religions can contribute to ecological sustainability. Many faith traditions emphasize the sacred duty of caring for the Earth inspiring individuals to live more sustainably and responsibly.

Religions also provide community structures that enable collective action and support, which are essential during ecological crises. They often encourage a forward-looking perspective that accounts for future generations and the well-being of the environment. By linking spiritual values to ecological responsibility, religions can both motivate responses to immediate crises and inspire long-term efforts towards sustainability.

In this context, interfaith dialogue plays a crucial role. It brings together different faith communities to address shared concerns and values fostering a network of solidarity and understanding. Through these dialogues, various traditions can share their insights on nature and sustainability, leading to greater ecological awareness and collaborative action. Notable examples of successful interfaith initiatives include GreenFaith,[28] the Parliament of the World's Religions[29] and The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative.[30] These efforts highlight how faith communities from different backgrounds can unite around common environmental goals. By working together, these communities not only enhance their collective resilience to ecological challenges. They also cultivate a culture of cooperation and mutual support, which is essential for addressing global environmental issues.

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[27] Fleming, J & Ledogar, RJ (2008), 'Resilience: An Evolving Concept: A Review of Literature Relevant to Aboriginal Research', *Primatisiwin*, vol. 6 (2), pp. 7-23, National Library of Medicine, accessed 8 October 2018, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2956753/.

[28] GreenFaith, homepage: https://greenfaith.org/.

[29] The Parliament of the World's Religion, homepage: https://parliamentofreligions.org/.

[30] Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, homepage: https://parliamentofreligions.org/.

3. Interfaith dialogue: overcoming obstacles

Religions have considerable potential to address ecological and societal challenges, yet this potential is frequently not fully realized. Two primary obstacles hinder its effective use: religious exclusivism and secular discomfort. Exclusivism, while providing a sense of certainty and clarity, often isolates and divides limiting cooperation in a diverse society. On the other hand, secular discomfort with religion can lead to alienation causing barriers to the possibility of meaningful dialogue. This section explores how those engaged in interfaith dialogue can navigate these tensions fostering understanding and collaboration in a way that transcends division.

3.1. Religious exclusivism and possible alternatives

Interfaith dialogue is an essential tool for fostering mutual understanding, yet this potential is not always recognized. The goal of such dialogue goes beyond mere conversation – it seeks to engage meaningfully with others, even when deeply held beliefs may differ. Within Christian theology, various perspectives exist on the nature of religious truth, including exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

Exclusivism is the belief that only one religion holds the absolute truth, and that all other religions are ultimately false or incomplete. In contrast, inclusivism suggests that while one's own faith may be the most complete expression of truth, other religions can contain valuable elements as well. Pluralism entails that there are many ways to salvation or enlightenment, and that all religions provide equally valid paths to salvation. Together, these systems contribute to a broader understanding of the divine.[31]

While inclusivism and pluralism can serve as productive foundations for interfaith engagement, exclusivism often presents significant barriers. Theologian Marianne Moyaert argues that exclusivism can be a stumbling stone to dialogue, as its adherents often perceive their own truth as absolute and non-negotiable. From this perspective, others are often seen as misguided or in need of conversion. This approach lacks a foundation of equality, mutual respect and understanding. Moreover, it can create tension and hinder authentic connections between religious communities.[32]

That said, some exclusivists are willing to engage in dialogue, provided their beliefs are not directly challenged. The key challenge, in that case, is balancing one's deep convictions with a willingness to listen and to learn from others.

Although exclusivism is a significant view within Christianity, it is important to note that it is not the dominant one across all Christian traditions. Exclusivist views

[31] Moyaert, M (2011), *Leven in Babelse tijden: De noodzaak van een interreligieuze dialoog*, Kalmthout, pp. 38–39; Van Nes-Visscher, E (2013), 'Exclusivisme en interreligieuze dialoog: Mijnenveld of mogelijkheid?', *Tijdschrift voor de Theologie*, vol. 53, pp. 264–280.

[32] Ibid.

are more commonly found in evangelical and orthodox religious circles.[33] How can the challenges posed by exclusivism in interfaith dialogue be navigated? Four alternative approaches may offer more fruitful paths: particularism, linguistic hospitality, dialogical pluralism, and universalism.

- Particularism emerged from dissatisfaction with pluralism, which is sometimes seen as an attempt to obscure religious differences. Rather than viewing religions as interchangeable paths to the same universal truth, particularism emphasizes the unique and incomparable nature of each religion. Religions are not replaceable instruments leading to the same end but are distinct worlds with their own unique characteristics. While particularism can make dialogue more challenging by assuming limited common ground between religions, it offers a framework for respecting differences without succumbing to relativism.[34]
- A second approach, introduced by Marianne Moyaert, is linguistic hospitality, which serves as a middle ground between particularism and pluralism. This concept, inspired by French philosopher Paul Ricœur, acknowledges that the language and symbols of another religion can never be fully grasped from an outsider's perspective. As each religious tradition carries its own unique worldview, complete translation is, according to Ricœur, impossible. Those who approach other traditions with genuine curiosity and openness can still engage meaningfully with the unfamiliar. Linguistic hospitality creates a respectful space where different religious traditions can encounter one another without allowing differences to become barriers to dialogue. It calls for meeting others on their own terms fostering a deeper understanding of the divine that transcends one's own framework. According to Moyaert, the ultimate religious challenge is to "see God's face in someone who does not look like us, whose skin color is different, whose culture is different, someone who speaks a different language, tells a different story, worships God in a different way".[35]
- Hendrik Vroom, emeritus professor of religious philosophy at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, presents the concept of dialogical pluralism as an approach that values the differences between religions while remaining open to learn from them. This method encourages religions to engage in conversations and share insights without giving up their own beliefs leading to mutual enrichment and better understanding. Vroom makes a key distinction between holistic and non-holistic religions. Holistic religions, like exclusivist traditions, see their beliefs as a complete system where all parts are connected. This view can make it hard to find common ground with other religions, thus complicating dialogue. Non-holistic

[33] Moyaert, M (2004). Een kritische analyse van de pluralistische interreligieuze dialoog vanuit een particularistisch perspectief. *Bijdragen*, 65(2), 189–208.

[34] Moyaert, M (2011), *Leven in Babelse tijden: De noodzaak van een interreligieuze dialoog*, Kalmthout, pp. 38–39; Van Nes-Visscher, E (2013), 'Exclusivisme en interreligieuze dialoog: Mijnenveld of mogelijkheid?', *Tijdschrift voor de Theologie*, vol. 53, pp. 264–280.

[35] Moyaert, M (2008), *Een kritische analyse van de theologie van de godsdiensten*. *Collationes*, 38(4), pp. 443. Available at: https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/intra-interreligieuze-dialoog/#ftn40 [Accessed 21 August 2024].

religions, however, can find points of agreement, which makes dialogue easier. Dialogical pluralism, unlike exclusivism, does not rely on a holistic view. Instead, it allows people to maintain their own beliefs while being open to others' insights, which helps in having meaningful discussions and appreciating different perspectives.[36]

- Finally, universalism presents a meaningful perspective that suggests all religions and spiritual traditions ultimately point to the same fundamental truth, despite their differences. For instance, the Quaker Universalist Fellowship embodies this view with the belief that "God is in everyone".[37] Additionally, the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.") is a principle found across many religions. In Christianity, Jesus articulates this in Matthew 7:12 (NIV): "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." Similarly, in Judaism, Rabbi Hillel's summary of the Torah in the Talmud (Shabbat 31a) states: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. This is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary." Islam echoes this sentiment in the Hadith, where Prophet Muhammad says: "None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself" (Al-Bukhari, Book 2, Hadith 12). Buddhism also reflects this principle, as the Dhammapada advises: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful" (Udana-Varga 5.18). In Hinduism, the Mahabharata suggests: "Let your deeds be a mirror of the love you have for yourself" (Anusasana Parva 113.8).[38]

Universalism contrasts with exclusivism, which claims that only one religion holds the complete truth while rejecting others. Instead, universalism acknowledges that various religions offer different but complementary perspectives on a shared ultimate reality. For instance, a universalist might view Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism as various paths leading to the same divine essence. Unlike dialogical pluralism, which seeks respectful dialogue and common ground among religions without necessarily claiming a unified truth, universalism states that these diverse practices and insights are ultimately unified by a common, universal divine truth. Universalism advocates for integrating different religious traditions, believing that together they reveal a deeper, interconnected spiritual reality.

3.2. Flexible and fluid religious identity

The previous approaches offer pathways to engage in dialogue while maintaining one's own beliefs in a multireligious context. However, these perspectives still assume that religions fit into distinct categories. In reality, traditional boundaries are increas-

[36] Ibid.

[37] Arriens, J (1995), 'The Place of Jesus in Quaker Universalism'. *Pamphlet 17*, Quaker Universalist Group UK. Available at: https://qug.org.uk/pamphlets-2/pamphlet-17/ [accessed 21 August 2024].

[38] Keasberry, K (2024), pp. 188–189.

ingly shifting towards more flexible and fluid religious identities. We will now explore two positions in this evolving context: syncretism and the intercultural approach.

- Syncretism. South Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kung who practices multiple religions herself, argues that religious traditions are not fixed entities but are interconnected in a complex, fluid process that transcends religious boundaries. She describes this interplay as a type of synergistic dance of salvation, survival, and healing. According to her, God is not confined to academic or theological systems but is found in the messy reality of life. Chung critiques traditional typologies such as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. She finds these models inadequate stating:

  > "Looking at these three positions, I don't feel that they represent the theological struggle of me and my Asian sisters. The exclusivist and inclusivist models are still imperialist and reflect the colonial attitude of the West towards the East, while the pluralist model is far too academic, Western, and male".[39]

  She argues that the pluralistic model is overly academic because it organizes religions into distinct categories, a perspective she associates with Western societies where Christianity was historically dominant. Chung believes that such a structured approach to pluralism fails to accommodate the lived experiences of people from diverse religious backgrounds. She notes: "I think that this orderly pluralism is only applicable to androcentric institutionalized religions because they fear that the purity of their dogmatic doctrines is at stake."[40] In contrast, Chung advocates for a "liberating, life-giving syncretism" that embraces the fluid and interconnected nature of faith traditions.[41]
- Intercultural theology. Bryan W. Van Norden, professor at the School of Philosophy at Wuhan University, advocates for a hybrid approach to understanding religious and philosophical traditions. He identifies what he calls philosophical ethnocentrism as a key barrier to mutual understanding between East and West, which often begins in academic settings. While Western students study figures like Socrates, Augustine, and Voltaire, Chinese students learn about Confucius, Laozi, and Buddhism. This educational divide limits students' ability to fully grasp and appreciate each other's worldviews hindering opportunities for peaceful and productive collaboration. In response, Van Norden proposes an intercultural philosophy advocating for students to engage with each other's intellectual traditions. This concept extends beyond philosophy to theology and could also be translated into intercultural theology. This approach encourages a cross-cultural exchange of

[39] Chung, HK (1999), ‚Die Weisheit der Mütter kennt keine Grenzen', in *Ein Hauch der Kraft Gottes: Weibliche Weisheit in den Weltregionen*, ed. SH Lee Linke, translated by M Kalsky, Lembeck, Frankfurt/M, pp. 1–8, here at 3–4.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

ideas fostering deeper mutual understanding and cooperation between different religious and philosophical traditions.[42]

The rise of flexible belief systems, syncretism, and intercultural approaches to theology challenges traditional Christian frameworks. Unlike conventional models that emphasize strict and lifelong adherence to one specific faith community and its doctrines, modern approaches encourage individuals to shape their own spiritual paths drawing from diverse traditions to support their personal development. As Hellemans pointed out, we are moving beyond the era in which global populations could be neatly categorized into distinct religious groups. Yet, despite this shift, the human search for meaning remains constant. In our increasingly secular and pluralistic societies, navigating the tensions between different religious beliefs is crucial. While significant challenges remain, concepts such as linguistic hospitality, dialogical pluralism, and intercultural theology offer pathways for meaningful engagement across religious and cultural divides. Striking a balance between staying true to one's own beliefs and being receptive to others' insights can help society embrace its religious diversity, fostering a more resilient and cohesive community.

3.3. The secular discomfort with religion

Having explored various potential models for respectful dialogue, we now turn to another significant challenge: the secular discomfort with religion in Western European societies. This discomfort is rooted in the separation of church and state, a principle considered essential for modern Western societies. In countries like Belgium and the Netherlands, this separation is often interpreted as a strict division, with religion being viewed as a private matter that belongs behind closed doors. In this context, public neutrality is equated with the absence of religion from public life.

The exclusion of religion from the public sphere is often driven by noble intentions such as promoting equality and preventing religious conflicts. This approach, however, poses significant problems in a multi-religious context. The theory of secularization, which predicted the disappearance of religion from the modern world, has largely been disproven. Religion continues to play a central role in the lives of millions of people, albeit in evolving forms. Efforts to marginalize religion have frequently led to misunderstanding and alienation. This raises a critical question: Can a society function purely on the basis of reason and pragmatism, or does it also need space for ideals and future visions, many of which have religious roots? The secular perspective, in its most rigid form, risks creating a blind spot for the deeply ingrained religious dimensions of human life and the universal quest for meaning.

One consequence of this discomfort with religion is the declining religious literacy particularly among younger generations. This lack of understanding leaves them vulnerable to simplistic or extremist interpretations of religious texts, often encountered

[42] Van Norden, BW (2017), *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto*, New York: Columbia University Press.

through social media and fundamentalist preachers. Without a solid grasp of religious traditions and their historical contexts, young people are more susceptible to misleading and radical ideologies. Additionally, the broader societal ignorance of religious traditions can perpetuate harmful stereotypes such as the idea that religion is inherently linked to conflict and violence. If left unchallenged, such misconceptions can fuel further hostility toward religious groups.

It is also crucial to recognize that in many parts of the world – including the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia – religion remains an integral part of social and cultural life. In this regard, secular Western societies are the exception rather than the norm. Yet, even in the West, religious traditions have played a profound role in shaping cultural and ethical values. Acknowledging these roots is essential for a fuller understanding of Western society.

Rather than viewing religion as a divisive force, it can serve as a bridge for greater social cohesion. The question is not whether religion should have a place in society but how that place should be defined. This leads to the concept of active pluralism, which recognizes religion and spirituality as fundamental aspects of human existence. Under this approach, state neutrality does not mean the exclusion of religion from the public sphere but rather the fair and equal recognition of all religious traditions.[43]

Active pluralism involves actively supporting interfaith dialogues and events and encouraging communities to celebrate each other's festivals and engage in meaningful conversations. This approach can reduce societal mistrust among different groups and harness the power of religion to collaborate towards a better, more sustainable world. Moreover, it can help individuals learn from each other's perspectives contributing to the prevention of radicalism and alienation.

4. Conclusion: towards a compassionate connection

The ecological crisis and its multifaceted challenges stands as one of the greatest tests humanity faces today. Overcoming its impacts requires a collective, global effort that can only succeed if all sectors of society unite. This includes scientists, technologists, governments, entrepreneurs, social organizations, and – importantly – religious leaders and faith communities. Together, we must tackle the urgent crises of our time to create a sustainable future for generations to come.

Excluding religion from the public domain in a diverse and globalized world means that the potential of religion within the ecological project remains largely untapped. Religions can play an essential role in fostering resilience amidst change. They offer ancient narratives that help people reflect on their place within the larger whole, and they provide communities that unite people around shared goals and values. Faith traditions also instill meaning and purpose, motivating individuals to take

[43] Van den Donk WBHJ et al (2006). Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie, Den Haag: Amsterdam University Press/WRR.

responsibility for caring for the Earth. Furthermore, many religious and spiritual traditions carry ecological wisdom and practices that encourage sustainable living.

When religion becomes marginalized in the public domain, however, it risks retreating behind insular walls. In times of declining membership and relevance, religious institutions often struggle for survival. As a result, they may turn inward fostering isolationism or fundamentalism. Yet, this response represents a missed opportunity. It not only weakens their ability to engage with the world, but it also stifles their potential to offer meaningful solutions to contemporary challenges.

To fully tap into religion's potential for resilience, it is vital to build bridges between religious communities and the public sphere. A worldview-diverse approach is needed, where multiple perspectives – including religious ones – are welcomed. Interfaith dialogue plays a critical role in this process. When religious communities come together to share their traditions, they can create connections, dissolve barriers, and collaboratively generate solutions to the ecological challenges we face.

Interfaith dialogue also nurtures a deeper understanding of the spiritual dimensions of ecological issues. By exploring the relationship between humanity and nature through the lenses of different faiths, new and holistic approaches can emerge – ones that contribute to both environmental restoration and long-term preservation. This collective reflection strengthens community resilience by uniting people around shared ethical commitments and inspiring them to take collective responsibility for the planet.

Moreover, interfaith dialogue provides a powerful platform for action. When religious communities join forces, their collective voice amplifies in public discussions on sustainability and environmental policy. This shared effort can be far more effective in influencing public behavior and policy decisions than isolated actions. Thus, interfaith dialogue not only addresses ecological problems but also builds a cooperative and resilient global community.

Religion therefore, should not be viewed as a threat but as a valuable partner in confronting the world's most pressing challenges. The path towards compassionate connection is threefold. First, the public domain must be recognized as worldview-diverse acknowledging that fostering religious diversity and dialogue is essential. Second, investment should be made in platforms for interfaith exchange such as shared celebrations, interfaith education, and open theological institutions. Third, advocacy for interfaith education and intercultural theology is essential promoting an approach to religions that is rooted in mutual understanding and collaboration. As explored, this can be achieved through various approaches that respect the distinctiveness of each faith tradition while always striving to deepen mutual understanding and cooperation. The ultimate goal is not only understanding each other's worldviews but also working together for the common good of all.

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The Lord's Prayer and its place in the London Underground. Reflections on religious diversity and a parody based on a central sacred text

Anne Breckner

Abstract

The Lord's Prayer is one of the most influential prayers in Christianity. Due to its prominence and popularity, it has evoked many adaptions and transformations. One humorous form of reception are parodies of the Lord's Prayer. Parodies based on the biblical, liturgical, and catechetical prayer exist in a huge variety. One example published in the London Underground is analyzed here in detail because it shows the link of popular culture, religion, and diversity.

Keywords

Lord's Prayer, parody, London, diversity, popular culture, Ian Dury, religious education, liturgy, catechism, Bible-reception

Introduction

The Lord's Prayer is one of the central texts in Christian tradition. Due to its prominence and its popularity, it has been the source of inspiration for countless theological reflections, spiritual meditations and educational publications. Apart from those well-researched sources, the Lord's Prayer has also been used in a humoristic way – in parodies. These transformations of the biblical text exist since the late Middle Ages in a multitude of ways and fulfil varied functions. Historically, times of radical change e.g. the Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, or Napoleon's rule were productive periods for parodies of the Lord's Prayer. In the 21st century, popular culture and parodies of the Lord's Prayer are closely connected. One recent parody of the Lord's Prayer will be examined here, which is linked to the London Underground. Its existence can be explained by the connection of religious diversity within western European society on the one hand and religious education that is still essential on the other hand.

As mentioned, the Lord's Prayer had a great influence in the past, since its first establishment as a part of liturgy in the early 2nd century A.D.,[1] and still has a unique role in religious education today.[2] It is often used in transformative processes in the field where religion, school, and culture meet. The connection of the three will become evident throughout the paper.[3] First, the Lord's Prayer as a biblical text in religious education will be described. Then, an overview of various popular parodies of the Lord's Prayer will be given in order to contextualize the example from London. A detailed analysis of the example will be the third point leading up to the conclusion which will address the question of whether the proof for religious diversity displayed in parodies of a sacred text can be seen as an opportunity or a challenge for society, theology and religious education alike.

The Lord's Prayer as a biblical and liturgical text in religious education

Already in the biblical narrative, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6: 9–13), it becomes obvious that the Lord's Prayer has a close connection to religious education, [4] since Jesus as a rabbi taught his disciples and listeners the following words as an example of how to pray:

> "Pray then like this: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

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1 Cf. Wengst, K (Ed.) (2011), *Didache (Apostellehre). Studienausgabe*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (Schriften des Urchristentums, vol. 2).

2 This major influence is not only true for Protestant belief, but also for Roman-Catholic or Orthodox traditions, as the Pope himself addressed the Lord's Prayer in a monograph. Cf. Francis (2018), *Our Father. Reflections on the Lord's Prayer. A Conversation with Marco Pozza. Translated from the Italian by Matthew Sherry*, New York: Image. Also, the orthodox churches emphasize the importance, e.g. Orthodox Prayer, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Lords_Prayer.html). Nonetheless, this paper will focus on my field of expertise, i. e. Protestant perspectives.

3 The paper is based on two opportunities to discuss the relevance of parodies of the Lord's Prayer with ERASMUS-partners of the Institute of Protestant Theology at Paderborn-University. I am grateful for the insights into Greek-orthodox religious education research during an international summer school in Thessaloniki 2018 where I presented my first draft under the title "Bible Transformations: Parodies of the Lord's Prayer. A Popular Form of Religious Parody and its Influence on Religious Education". Also helpful were the Belgian comments on my presentation 2023, which was entitled "Religious Diversity Based on a Central Sacred Text: Parodies of the Lord's Prayer in Transportation" by the ERASMUS-partners from FPTR Brussels.

4 Cf. for theological background on the Lord's Prayer e.g. Luz, U (2002), Das Evangelium nach Matthäus. 1. Teilband (Mt 1–7). *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, Vol. I/1*, Düsseldorf, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger, Neukirchener, 5th ed., chapter 'Das Unservater (6,9-13)', pp. 432–458.

Some manuscripts add: "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."[5]

The prayer-text in Matthew is commonly supplemented by the doxology, as the translators of the English Standard Version point out. The wording of the prayer in biblical translations as well as the liturgical prayer is commonly divided into addressing God, seven pleas (You- and We-pleas) and the doxology. Nevertheless, there are partial differences in the chosen words that are commonly spoken and firmly embedded in Christian services not only in German Protestant tradition, [6] but also in other confessions and national churches, e.g. Anglican services[7]:

"*Priest*
As our Saviour taught us, so we pray
All
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever.
Amen."[8]

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5 Bible-Translation: English Standard Version, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.bibleserver.com/text/ESV/Matthew6). For a more detailed critical apparatus e.g. cf. New Revised Standard Version, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://biblia.com/books/nrsv/Mt6.9).

6 Cf. Union Evangelischer Kirchen; Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands; Evangelische Verlagsanstalt (2022), Evangelisches Gottesdienstbuch. Agende für die Union Evangelischer Kirchen in der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (UEK) und für die Vereinigte Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Deutschlands (VELKD). Nach der „Ordnung gottesdienstlicher Texte und Lieder" (2018) überarbeitete Fassung 2020, Altarausgabe, Leipzig, Bielefeld: EVA; Luther-Verlag: The main parts of a service in the United or Lutheran churches belonging to the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany) are 1) inauguration and invocation, 2) annunciation and confession, 3) as an optional part communion, 4) dismissal and benediction. The communal Lord's Prayer appears either in the third or fourth step, as a way to say grace before celebrating the Lord's Supper or as a closing of intercessory prayers. Also cf. Bieritz, K (2004), *Liturgik*, Berlin: de Gruyter.

7 The Anglican reference is chosen since the analysis in the analytical part of this essay deals with a British example.

8 The Church of England: 'The Lord's Prayer. Worship texts and resources. Common Material', viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-

While the renowned version of the Lord's Prayer from the Gospel of Matthew and the doxology, which was included by the editors of the Didache (Did 8:2),[9] is still present in liturgy, the shorter version by Luke is given less attention. Nonetheless, the Lucan version is still rooted in the idea of the Lord's Prayer as an exemplary, educational text that can help people during the process of prayer-education, according to Luke 11: 1–4:

> "Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'"[10]

As the Lord's Prayer appears in two of the synoptical Gospels for educational purposes, it has had a major position in Protestantism's liturgical practices, religious education and personal spirituality alike. This can be easily underlined by Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Luther wrote this short text in 1529 as an educational resource for the general public to get familiar with the fundamental elements of Christian faith.[11] The Lord's Prayer is placed in the central position. For all of the five parts, Luther used the same structure. First, he cited a short part of the Ten Commandments, of the Apostles' Creed, or of the Lord's Prayer, then he asks "What does this mean?" and explains the verse in his own words. The structure remains for the last two essential theological aspects, his depiction of the two Protestant sacraments – the Sacrament of the Holy Baptism and of the Altar, namely the Holy Communion. In regard to the first section of the Lord's Prayer, Luther writes:

> "'Our Father in heaven.'
> What does this mean?

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resources/common-worship/common-material/lords-prayer). Highlights were included by the Church of England. They offer two alternative versions of the Lord's Prayer to be spoken by the whole congregation. The variations concern syntax and choice of words. The more modern version is quoted here instead of old English, like the singular possessive pronoun "thy" or the verb "art", e.g. in "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name".

9 Cf. Wengst, *Didache*.

10 Bible-Translation: English Standard Version, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.bibleserver.com/ESV/Luke11).

11 Luther's catechism was not the first attempt to establish basic religious education in German, but was incredibly successful. Protestant pupils had to learn the text by heart and were asked to recite it regularly over centuries up until the second half of the 20th century. Cf. for historical development before Luther Kohls, E (Ed.) (1980), *Evangelische Katechismen der Reformationszeit vor und neben Martin Luthers Kleinem Katechismus*, Gütersloh: Mohn, 2nd ed. (Texte zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte, vol. 16). Cf. for historical development after Luther's death Fraas, H (1971), *Katechismustradition. Luthers kleiner Katechismus in Kirche und Schule*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (Arbeiten zur Pastoraltheologie, Liturgik und Hymnologie, vol. 7).

> Here God would encourage us to believe that he is truly our Father and we are truly his children – in order that we may approach him boldly and confidently in prayer, even as beloved children approach their dear father."[12]

This short extract illustrates how Luther tried to use a simple, memorable language, which is crucial for learners not only to memorize the Lord's Prayer but also Luther's interpretations by heart.[13] This catechism is one influential example of how the Lord's Prayer as a biblical text used to be implemented in school and church settings for a period of over four centuries. Even in the 20th century, Luther's Small Catechism was still used as a tool for teaching and learning Christian core texts.[14]

In parts of Germany where the Reformed or Calvinist protestant tradition has been more influential than the Lutheran, the Heidelberg Catechism, published in 1563 and regularly updated since then, has been used to educate children in churches and schools alike.[15] Nevertheless, the Lord's Prayer has a dominant position there as well, the last ten questions, i.e. the concluding part of the 129 questions and answers deal with the Lord's Prayer. Again, a brief extract shall exemplify the structure of question and answer that can be learned by heart and repeated in a test as well as in a dialog:

> "120. Q. Why has Christ commanded us to address God as Our Father?
>
> A. To awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer that childlike reverence and trust toward God which should be basic to our prayer: God has become our Father through Christ and will much less deny us what we ask of Him in faith than our fathers would refuse us earthly things.
>
> 121. Q. Why is there added, Who art in heaven?
>
> A. These words teach us not to think of God's heavenly majesty in an earthly manner, and to expect from His almighty power all things we need for body and soul."[16]

Both examples of teaching and learning with Catechisms should emphasize to what extent the Lord's Prayer is rooted in educational settings in Protestantism. This can be underlined by the fact that the academic field of thinking about religious education

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[12] Cf. English text of Luther's Small Catechism, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.ekd.de/en/Small-Catechism-298.htm).

[13] Cf. Meyer-Blanck, M (2003), *Kleine Geschichte der evangelischen Religionspädagogik. Dargestellt anhand ihrer Klassiker*, Gütersloh: Kaiser. Also cf. Lachmann, R (2013), 'Geschichte der Religionspädagogik bis Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts. Didaktische Schlaglichter', pp. 53–72, in: Rothgangel, M et al. (Ed.), *Religionspädagogisches Kompendium*, 8th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Also cf. Ehlich, K (1999), 'Der Katechismus – eine Textart an der Schnittstelle von Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit', *Z Literaturwiss Linguistik* 29 (4), pp. 9–33. DOI: 10.1007/BF03379136, here p. 27.

[14] Cf. Fraas, *Katechismustradition*.

[15] Cf. historical overview: Heidelberg Catechism, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.ekd.de/en/Heidelberg-Catechism-131.htm).

[16] Cf. English text of the Heidelberg Catechism, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.ekd.de/en/Heidelberg-Catechism-302.htm).

used to be called "Catechetics" ("*Katechetik*") until the early 20th century.[17] Consequently, the teaching and learning of religious elements was inevitably associated with catechisms and therefore also to the Lord's Prayer.

Even if children and teenagers do not usually learn the Catechisms by heart anymore today, understanding the meaning of the Lord's Prayer still is one important goal in religious education. Teaching units dealing with the Lord's Prayer can be implemented in religious education for all ages and school-types.[18]

Overview on parodies of the Lord's Prayer

Having mentioned the relevance and centrality of the Lord's Prayer as a biblical and liturgical text in Protestant religious education, now a rather specific way of adapting and transforming the Lord's Prayer in common culture is taken into account.[19] There is a huge, heterogeneous group of texts from the 13th up to the 21st century, transformations of the Lord's Prayer, that can be subsumed in the term parodies based on the Lord's Prayer.[20]

There are different motivations to write and read parodies of the Lord's Prayer. Even if it is not possible to determine exactly why an author (who might even remain

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17 Cf. Meyer-Blanck, *Kleine Geschichte der Religionspädagogik*, p. 11.

18 Cf. all curricula in Protestant religious education for the various school-types on the homepage of the Ministry for Schools in NRW, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.schulentwicklung.nrw.de/lehrplaene/).

19 Parodies of the Lord's Prayer have been my field of research for my dissertation. From a corpus of over 500 parodies, I selected a representative number of texts for every century starting from the 16th until the 21st century to be analyzed in detail and to draw conclusions about their relevance for theology, popular culture, and religious education. The monograph be published in 2025. The following categories, which intent to give an overview, summarize and simplify some of my findings.

20 I undertake the challenge of a detailed definition of parody and prayer in my dissertation which has be published in 2025 as open-access publication. For a brief interdisciplinary overview of the terms, cf. Lamping, D (2009), 'Parodie', pp. 570–574, in: Lamping, D (Ed.), *Handbuch der literarischen Gattungen*, Stuttgart: Kröner. Also cf. Langenhorst, G (2009), 'Gebet', pp. 287–296, in: Lamping, D (Ed.), *Handbuch der literarischen Gattungen*, Stuttgart: Kröner. Also helpful is Gilman, S (1974), The parodic sermon in European perspective. Aspects of liturgical parody from the Middle ages to the twentieth century, Wiesbaden: F. Steiner (Beiträge zur Literatur des XV. bis XVIII. Jahrhunderts, 6) because of its literary and religious connection which states, "Parody may often create a comic effect" through "substitution, addition and subtraction" (p. 2). In brief Gilman points out, "Parody is a literary form which is created by incorporating elements of an already existing form in a manner creating a conscious contrast." (p. 4) Two preceding essays with analyses of parodies on the Lord's Prayers exemplify aspects of the collective work. Cf. Breckner, A (2018), 'Einfach frei Schnauze. Religiöse Parodien der Reformationszeit', TheoMag , vol. 115, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.theomag.de/115/ab01.htm). Also cf. Breckner, A (2019), 'Besetzte Heimat. Eine Spurensuche in Vaterunser-Parodien', pp. 203-224, in: Brinkmann, F & Hammann, J (Ed.): *Heimatgedanken. Theologische und kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien (Pop. religion: Lebensstil – Kultur – Theologie, 5).

anonymous) wrote one specific parody or why one parody becomes particularly popular, educated guesses can be made and can lead to the formulation of several potential intentions that are closely connected to the functions of parodies:

- contextual critic in one particular historical and regional situation,
- general provocation intended (often, one parody acts as a catalyst for negative emotions), often, idols or enemies are constructed or deconstructed,
- fun with words and poetical freedom to use common cultural knowledge.

There are different formal types:

- the Lord's Prayer is arranged in one column, the added text in a second column,
- meaningful words within the Lord's Prayer are replaced, e.g. the word "Father",
- altered fragments of the Lord's Prayer are used, e.g. in headlines, or only syntactical aspects remind of the prayer,
- the free use of the words of Lord's Prayer might also be parodistic, depending on the media, e.g. through audiovisual elements – adding exaggerated music or caricatures.

There are very different topics: political power-struggles (e.g. Napoleon), material goods (e.g. beer), technical inventions (e.g. cinema or social media), activities (e.g. football). Occasionally, sceptics reflect on their relationship to God.

Different ways of publication of the parodies are plausible on the one hand due to the ever-changing and evolving media-landscape, on the other hand it is possible to filter information about the individual texts due to their way of publication. Furthermore, it becomes evident that within the ways of publication, there are solely written forms, yet oral forms are also found: pamphlets were used e.g. during the Reformation, online-blogs and social media are a form of publication common to the 21st century,[21] TV-advertisements, e.g. German Champions League-Spot. There is also proof for published parodies of the Lord's Prayer in every print-medium such as theater-monologues, novels, newspapers, short-stories, anthologies and so on.

Obviously, there are various authors with different social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Denominational distinctions become particularly interesting in times of struggles, e.g. in the Reformation period. Variations are also noticeable depending on whether clergy or laypeople write and adapt parodies. Class- and milieu-differences also influence the parodies.

Parodies created different levels of public uproar. Some parodies got much attention, public written comments can be interpreted. Others were written solely in a private domain, e.g. in a letter to another person.

[21] A famous German example of a parody of the Lord's prayer on YouTube is an advertisement for a soccer game: SunnyDriv3BY (2012), 'Bayern München vs. Chelsea – Das Gebet zum Finale Dahoam Sat.1 Ran Champions League Final Trailer', posted on 12/05/2012, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWbAmGwvGzE). Another example deals with beer as a heavenly liquid: Chee Sy (2008), 'Das Vater unser mal anders – Biergebet. Unser erstes Video was ma selber gmacht haben :) Text is ned von uns. Nur die Bild geschichte…', posted on 26/07/2008, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GvP-SZYLXU).

Due to these many variations and the huge diversity within parodies of the Lord's Prayer, it is possible to decipher diachronic developments concerning the reception of the parodies, about religious education and religious criticism as well as about political power-relations.[22] The first essays on the topic by Werner, Mehring, Becker und Vorwahl enabled further research, but they omit the theological perspective due to their literary or cultural focus.[23]

Transformations of the most central prayer of Christianity give insight into past and present theological, cultural, and educational discourses and thereby represent religious diversity within society. The analysis of parodies on the Lord's Prayer needs

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[22] These overall tendencies are simply meant as an overview of a huge field of research, that have not received much academic attention, except from some essays in cultural anthropology and literary studies. For parodies in anthropological research, cf. Werner, R (1892, Reprint 1974), 'Das Vaterunser als gottesdienstliche Zeitlyrik', *Vierteljahrschrift für Litteraturgeschichte*, vol. 5, pp. 1–49. Novati, F (1889), 'La parodia sacra nelle letterature moderne', *Studi critici e lettarari*. Mehring, G (1909), 'Das Vaterunser als politisches Kampfmittel', *Zeitschr. des Vereins für Volkskunde*, vol. 19, pp. 129–142. Ilvonen, E (1914), *Parodies de thèmes pieux dans la poésie francoise du moyen âge*, Helsingfors, 1914. Becker, A (1916), 'Gebetsparodien. Ein Beitrag zur religiösen Volkskunde des Völkerkrieges', *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde,* vol. 20, pp. 16.28. Lehmann, P (1922), *Die Parodie im Mittelalter*, München: Drei Masken. Vorwahl, H (1932), 'Zur Parodie von Gebeten', *Zeitschrift für Religionspsychologie: Beitr. zur religiösen Seelenforschung u. Seelenführung*., pp. 168–171. Some of these authors, e.g. Novati, Ilvonen and Lehmann focus on parodia sacra, which includes more than just parodies on the Lord's Prayer. Bachtin criticized this wide approach and mentioned some aspects on parodies on the Lord's Prayer as well: Cf. Bachtin, M (1987), *Rabelais und seine Welt. Volkskultur als Gegenkultur*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, p. 105. For parodies in literary studies, see Boerma, N (2010), 'Vaterunser-Parodien in den Niederlanden, in Bayern und in der Schweiz', pp. 33–42, in: Brückner, W et al. (Ed.), *Arbeitskreis Bild Druck Papier. Tagungsband Nürnberg 2009. Wolfgang Brückner zum 80. Geburtstag,* Münster: Waxmann. Burke, P (1981), *Helden, Schurken und Narren. Europäische Volkskultur in der frühen Neuzeit*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta. Lemberg, M (1997), 'Stiefvater, der du bist in Paris. Politische Satiren und Parodien auf der Basis religiöser Texte', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, vol. 79, pp. 313–358. 'Parodie', pp. 319–422 in: Liede, A (1992), *Dichtung als Spiel. Studien zur Unsinnspoesie an den Grenzen der Sprache. Mit einem Nachtrag Parodie, ergänzender Auswahlbibliographie, Namenregister und einem Vorwort neu herausgegeben von Walter Pape. Vol. II*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2nd ed. Schenda, R (1977), *Volk ohne Buch. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der populären Lesestoffe 1770–1910*, München: dtv. Verweyen, Th & Witting, G (1979), *Die Parodie in der neueren deutschen Literatur. Eine systematische Einführung*, Darmstadt: WBG. Also cf. Verweyen, Th & Witting, G (1987), *Die Kontrafaktur. Vorlage und Verarbeitung in Literatur, bildender Kunst, Werbung und politischem Plakat*, Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz. Wehse, R (2010), 'Vaterunser', pp. 1354–1358, in: Brednich, R (Ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, vol. 13. Berlin: De Gruyter.

[23] A brief theological overview is included in Leutzsch, M (2006), 'Was ist daraus geworden? Eine wirkungsgeschichtliche Reportage', pp. 41–56, in: Janssen, J & Suhr, U (Ed.), *Das Vaterunser entfalten. Liturgische Schritte zwischen Kirchentag und Gemeinde,* Gütersloh, Gütersloher. For a polemic evaluation of parodies on religious text, see Imbach, J (1977), 'Die Lästerungen und unser Glaube. Zur Parodie religiöser Texte in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur', *Christ in der Gegenwart*, vol. 29, pp. 413f.

an interdisciplinary approach that integrates methods from biblical, historical, cultural and literary studies, as will become evident during analyzing the following example on transportation.

Analysis of an Example on Transportation

One of the most visible and prominent English parodies of the Lord's Prayer was publicly displayed in London Public Transportation in the early 21st century:[24]

A billboard in the London Underground from 2013 was posted on Twitter and received further attention in an online article of the Evening Standard. The billboard displays the logo of the London Underground (red circle with blue rectangle) and the typed blue title 'Service information'. Below those two items, there are the subtitles 'Date' and 'Time'. Also, there are two hashtags added as further subtitles in handwriting with black boardmarker - '#TravelBetterLondon' and '#NationalPoetryDay'. In the center of the billboard, there is the text of the transformed Lord's Prayer:

'Our father who art in Hendon
Harrow Road be thy name
Thy Kingston come, thy Wimbledon
In Erith as it is in Hendon
Give us this day our Berkhamsted
And forgive us our Westminsters
As we forgive those who Westminster against us
Lead us NOT into Temple Station
But deliver us from Ealing
For thine is the Kingston
The Purley and the Crawley
For Iver and Iver
CrouchEnd'.

The whole handwritten text contradicts the orderly background lines, as the writer seemed to have deliberately squeezed the thirteen verses of the prayer-transformation in the space of ten lines.

[24] Poster on a billboard in the London Underground, posted on Twitter, republished by Blundy, R (2013), 'Rocker Ian Dury's parody of the Lord's Prayer appears on London tube notice board', *Evening Standard*, 28/11/2013, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/rocker-ian-dury-s-parody-of-the-lord-s-prayer-appears-on-london-tube-notice-board-8969459.html).

It can be analyzed in at least four ways: formal analysis, content analysis, context of production and reception, and theological relevance. These steps and connected analytic questions could also be a guideline for teachers who want to implement literary texts related to biblical origins. At first, one needs a deeper look at the text:

Hand-written text from the billboard in verses	**Referential station and Travel for London-line with price zone**[25]	**Location within London**
#TravelBetterLondon #NationalPoetryDay	Digital reference to Twitter	
Our father who art in Hendon	Tube-stations "Hendon" (pink-white Thameslink line); "Hendon Central" (black Northern line): price zone 3 out of 8	Peripheral, north London
Harrow Road be thy name	Tube-stations "Harrow-on-the-Hill" (purple Metropolitan line); "West Harrow" (purple Metropolitan line); "South Harrow" (blue Piccadilly line); "North Harrow" (purple Metropolitan line); "Harrow & Wealdstone" (brown Bakerloo or orange-white London Overground line): price zone 5 out of 8	North-west London
Thy Kingston come, thy Wimbledon	Railway/bus station "Kingston Rail Station"; bus stations "Kingston Road" or "Kingston Crescent". Tube-stations "Wimbledon Park" (green District line); "Wimbledon" (green District line); "Wimbledon Chase" (pink-white Thameslink line); "South Wimbledon" (black Northern line): prize zone 3 out of 8	Peripheral, Kingston without Tube-access in south-west London; Wimbledon: South-west London, famous for tennis-tournament
In Erith as it is in Hendon	Railway station "Erith Rail Station"; bus stations "Victoria Road Erith", "Erith Leisure Centre", "Avenue Road Erith", "Erith & District Hospital"	Peripheral, Erith without Tube-access in south-east Greater London
Give us this day our Berkhamsted	Railway station "Berkhamsted Rail Station"	42 km north-west of London in Hertfordshire
And forgive us our Westminsters	Tube-station "Westminster" (green District, yellow Circle or grey Jubilee line: prize zone 1 out of 8	Central London, at the Thames, location of the Parliament and Westminster Abbey
As we forgive those who Westminster against us		

[25] A London Tube map from before 2013 may vary from the recent map. Cf. Tube map, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://content.tfl.gov.uk/standard-tube-map.pdf). Places without Underground-access were researched online: Plan a journey, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://tfl.gov.uk/plan-a-journey/).

Hand-written text from the billboard in verses	Referential station and Travel for London-line with price zone[25]	Location within London
Lead us NOT into Temple Station	Tube-station "Temple" (green District, yellow Circle line): prize zone 1 out of 8	Central London, part of "City of London" with financial business, jurisdiction and Temple Church
But deliver us from Ealing	Tube-stations "South Ealing" (blue line), "West Ealing" (purple-white line), "Ealing Broadway" (purple-white Elizabeth, red Central, green District line), "North Ealing" (blue line), "Ealing Common" (green, blue line): prize zone 3 out of 8	West London, location of BBC-studios
For thine is the Kingston	See above	See above
The Purley and the Crawley	Tube-station "Purely" (pink-white line): prize zone 6 out of 8; Railway station "Crawley Rail Station"	Purley peripheral, south Greater London; Crawley 30 km outside of London in West Sussex, close proximity to Gatwick Airport
For Iver and Iver	Tube-station "Iver" (purple-white Elizabeth line): prize zone 6 out of 8 (outside fare zone)	Peripheral, west London
CrouchEnd	Tube-station "Crouch Hill" (orange-white London Overground line): prize zone 3 out of 8	"Crouch End" area in North London

1. Formal analyses

In order to analyze a source, it is essential to have a basic understanding of the context in which it was created. In parts, this information has already been addressed through the transcription of the billboard-texts in the analytical table with the annotations concerning the mentioned places. But to take in the most central aspects of the source systematically, more context on potential authors, time and place of publication and referential text-basis from the Lord's Prayer might help:

a) Author and Publisher

The parody relating to public transportation has its own history of reception. Therefore, it is not possible to point out the author specifically. The version displayed was published only with hashtags on an information board within London, without a clear stating of the author. A version with the same text named "Bus Driver's Prayer" was "recorded by Ian Dury, […] on the soundtrack album *Apples* (1989) and later on *The Bus Driver's Prayer & Other Stories* (1992)".[26]

[26] Wikipedia (Ed.) (2024), Bus Driver's Prayer, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bus_Driver's_Prayer&oldid=1240474540). Cf. for verification of Ian Dury's

The Wikipedia article[27] about one song by the British artist Ian Dury shows the intertextual and intermedial reference system that occurs frequently with parodies based on the Lord's Prayer. The Wikipedia article also states that the "words are apocryphal and have been around since 1960 at least".[28] So the question of authorship cannot be finalized as the billboard-version is published anonymously, although a reference to Ian Dury (1942–2000) is likely.

b) Time of Publication

The Bus Driver's Prayer was published in 1989. The billboard-version, which solely added social-media-hashtags, was published in 2013 by the public transportation organization "Transport for London" on the occasion of National Poetry Day. The version publicly displayed in London as well as Dury's version were re-published many times. Nonetheless, the photo-tweet by a Twitter-user posting as "Cyclinginstructor" can be exactly dated: He posted this image of the billboard on November 25th, 2013 at 09:32.[29] As a time reference, the National Poetry Day can also help. In Britain, the annual national celebration of poetry by professional poets and private authors alike is normally held on the first Thursday of October since 1994, sponsored by the Poetry Society[30] and Forward Arts Foundation.[31] It is possible that the billboard-parody was therefore put up on October 3rd, 2013, but tweeted and retweeted not until November.

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status as a British singer Encyclopedia Britannica: List of singers, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.britannica.com/art/list-of-singers-2034966). Cf. for the albums Drury, J (2003), *Ian Dury & the Blockheads. Song by song*, London: Sanctuary, pp. 140 and 197.

27 The author of this article is aware of the fact that Wikipedia is not a reliable scientific resource. But through the existence of the article, it becomes evident that the relevant parody of the Lord's prayer has become a part of popular culture. Cf. for the role of Wikipedia in popular memory Wolff, R (2013), 'The Historian's Craft, Popular Memory, and Wikipedia', pp. 64–74, in: Dougherty, J & Nawrotzki, K (Ed.), *Writing History in the Digital Age*, University of Michigan Press (Digital Humanities).

28 Ibid. Cf. also similar adaptions in a forum for readers of the newspaper Guardian: N. N. (2014), 'Notes and Queries. I once heard a London cabbie recite a version of the Lord's Prayer consisting almost entirely of puns on London place names. Does anyone know the words?', *guardian.co.uk*, posted on 20/02/2014, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,5753,-2712,00.html).

29 In this essay, the internet- microblogging service famous for its short comments of 140 signs, is still referred to as Twitter, although it is nowadays called X, because the relevant posts were created before the selling- and renaming-process of the company by Elon Musk in 2023. Cf. Cycling Instructor @cicom (2013), 'Brilliant Lords Prayer parody using station names v. funny #tfl #London' on Twitter, posted on 25/11/2013, viewed 13/02/2025 (http://t.co/3sDkeWVDVe).

30 Cf. The Poetry Society, 'National Poetry Day', viewed 13/02/2025 (https://poetrysociety.org.uk/education/national-poetry-day/).

31 Cf. Forward Arts Foundation (2024), 'Home – We promote the enjoyment & understanding of poetry, inspire people to express themselves through poetry, & support poets & communities', posted on 15/08/2024, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://forwardartsfoundation.org/).

c) Place

On the text-immanent level, there are several places named which can be located within greater London. For example, Hendon, i. e. Hendon Central Station; Bus Lines 83, N5, N83 can be taken from there. Fairly well known are also the tube-stops "Temple" and "Westminster" due to their location in the center of London. The place of publication is also London, for Dury's and the recent version. But the re-published versions on Twitter show the far-spread impact of the text possibly globally, although it seems to be limited locally in the first place. Concerning the stations, another aspect of space is relevant. Not only bus-stops but also tube stations were mentioned by Dury and the billboard alike.

d) The sources for the text: Matthew 6, Luke 11, liturgical texts, or catechisms?

It becomes obvious while listening to an audio-recording of Ian Dury performing his *Bus Driver's Prayer*[32] that he based his interpretation on the liturgical use of the Lord's Prayer. Most likely the version derived from the Anglican translation of the Lord's Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer, its origins going back to 1549.[33] The Book of Common Prayer certainly chose Matthew's tradition over that of Luke.

More questions could be asked concerning formal aspects of the text such as typological questions, e.g. is this example a parody or just overall a transformation of the Lord's Prayer? An alternative approach could be to put more emphasis on intertextual relations: In what ways does this text differ from other more traditional interpretative exegeses of the prayer, e.g. in the catechisms? Here, a closer examination of the content sheds light on the potential of the parody for diversity-related questions of religious education.

2. Content analysis

To look at the content of the source is central in making parodies of the Lord's Prayer accessible for religious education:

a) Which situation is depicted in the text? Which stylistic devices emphasize the content?

In short, the text shows the importance of public transport in London by naming different bus- and tube stations in central and greater London. One means of playful language is repetition, clearly seen with "Hendon", "Westminster" (Sg. Neologism as verb/ Pl. noun) and "Kingston". Also colloquially reframed station-names are used

[32] Cf. choccystarfish1 (2010), 'Ian Dury – Bus Drivers' Prayer [HQ Audio]', YouTube, posted on 15/03/2010, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6LzmhQXybE).

[33] Cf. Jacobs, A (2013), *The "Book of Common Prayer. A Biography. Course Book,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (Lives of Great Religious Books), p. ix.

which are even ambiguous (e.g. "Ealing") for people not taking the Tube regularly. The phonetic resemblance of the stations' names to the meaning-carrying words, e.g. "Hendon" and "Heaven" or "Harrow" and "Hallowed" in the Lord's Prayer is used to keep the rhythm and syntactical structure of the prayer. By this technique, some sentences and former pleas lose any meaningful content entirely, like "Thy Kingston come, thy Wimbledon". In other cases, like "Lead us NOT into Temple Station", the words make sense in a way semantically. Possibly, Temple Station is hated due to jammed wagons and crowds during rush hours, so no one wants to go there voluntarily.

b) Does the text combine sacral and trivial aspects? Does the text evoke an image of God?

From my perspective, the text does not evoke strong sacral allusions any longer since plays on words have become more important than the transmission of a meaningful message. The only remaining sacral aspect is the use of the structure of a well-known, culturally widespread Christian framework. The marketing department of "Transport for London" did not seem to think there is harm in using a condensed, contextualized, and highly altered version of the Lord's Prayer, however, elements of a prayer that mark it as a religious text, e.g. "Amen" or mentioning eternity as God's everlasting sphere in "for ever and ever" are taken away. Nonetheless, the question remains whether it is a prayer-transformation: Within the 2013-text text as well as in the Ian Dury version, the "father" is addressed but not specifically characterized. This is remarkable because supposedly older versions "predating Dury's recording"[34] are quoted with the first line addressing "Our Farnham, who art in Hendon"[35] instead of "Our father".

c) Why is the text considered a parody?

Punk rock, as performed by Ian Dury, has links to stand-up comedy.[36] Thus, the performance of the *Bus Driver's Prayer* can likely be attributed to a comical, possibly parodistic intention. The studio-recorded performance starts with 27 seconds of positive, lively instrumental pop music with drums, synthesizer and an electric bass, only interrupted by barely audible laughter. From second 28 to the end of the track, (00:58) a male voice recites the prayer-parody underlined by continuous music and laughter which becomes stronger until an exhilarated accumulation in the end.[37] The witty,

[34] Wikipedia (Ed.) (2024), 'Bus Driver's Prayer'.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Cf. for thorough analysis of Dury's music Double, O (2007), 'Punk Rock as Popular Theatre: NTQ', *New Theatre Quarterly* 23 (89), pp. 35–48.

[37] choccystarfish1 (2010), 'Ian Dury – Bus Drivers' Prayer. Solely the text-performance without music by Dury himself can also give an insight to the parody-intention: MercifulRelease (2012), Ian Dury – Freedom – Bus Driver's Prayer. Recorded from the TV programme "The Way They Were" which was extracts taken from "So it Goes" TV show. The poem "Freedom" was written by Charles Mingus', posted on 01/05/2012, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcAWFX9aN6Q).

ironic song with many puns takes the listener "on a slightly bizarre tour of London, with the occasional peek beyond the boundaries".[38] Those impressions refer back to the definition of parody which creates a comic effect by means of "substitution, addition and subtraction",[39] and deliberate contrast to a previous text. Therefore, from my point of view, the transport-related transformative text based on the Lord's Prayer can count as a parody.

3. Production, distribution and reception

The production, distribution and reception processes of parodies on the Lord's prayer are frequently complex and need an awareness of the specific media. In order to make assumptions about the religious and theological relevance of the parodies, it is also essential to emphasize as clearly as possible the various individuals involved in publishing and receiving the texts. As mentioned above, Ian Dury is relevant at the level of production. He calls his text *Bus Driver's Prayer*, a clear reference to a prayer to God. But his text does not create a certain idea or characterization of God. In comparison to the Lord's Prayer, the meaning of the words becomes so blurry that one cannot deduce Dury's image of God. On the contrary, the absurdly assorted combinations of verbs and station-names is unable to address any personal higher power. Rather, Dury's personal connection to public transportation is his biological father, apparently a bus driver himself.[40] Dury's origin in Harrow, with the birth entry in the district of Hendon, is reflected in the poem, although he emphasizes "his exaggerated Cockney stage persona" and Upminster, Essex-reference.[41] His religious confession is unclear,[42] it seemed to be less relevant than his physical disability as a result of polio, which he saw as a performative strength. His mother was raised as part of a matriarchy of "wealthy Irish Protestants"[43] which had an influence on Ian as well. Although his protestant socialization during his childhood probably taught him the words of

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[38] Green, N (2005), 'Songs from the Wood and Sounds of the Suburbs: A Folk, Rock and Punk Portrait of England, 1965-1977', *Built Environment* 31 (3), pp. 255–270.

[39] Gilman, *The parodic sermon in European perspective*, p. 2.

[40] Cf. Denselow, R (2000), 'Obituary Ian Dury', *The Guardian*, posted 27/03/2000, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/mar/27/guardianobituaries.robindenselow), also for biographical details Balls, R (2004), 'Dury, Ian Robins (1942-2000)', pp. 1980-1982, in: Matthew, H & Harrison, B (Ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press or 'Dury, Ian (1998)', in: Larkin, C (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, Vol. 2. 3rd ed. London: Macmillan.

[41] Denselow, 'Obituary Ian Dury'.

[42] He had a punk rock performance in a former church in 1998 for example, as stated in Birch, W (2010), *Ian Dury. The definitive biography*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson, chapter 23, p. 335.

[43] Balls, R (2011), *Sex And Drugs And Rock 'n' Roll*. 3rd ed. London: Omnibus Press, chapter 1 Upminster Kid. In chapter 13, the background of the albums Apples and Bus Driver's Prayer and Other Stories is explained without religious allusions. Only the "uplifting jazz music and the kind of humour" in the title song is mentioned. His protestant background is also referred to by Birch, chapter 1, p. 7 and chapter 6. Also, Jim Dury only refers to his Protestant work ethics instead of mentioning a religious confession, p. 93.

the Lord's Prayer, his liberal cultural upbringing and his understanding of arts, lyrics and music as being means of polemic or provocation enabled him at the same time to distance himself from the sacred words in order to publish a parody on one of the most influential Christian prayers.

The reception of the parody by "Transport for London"[44] was clearly labelled by the hashtag on the billboard, #nationalpoetryday. The state-run public-transportation cooperation or rather their marketing-department did not want to publish a prayer to God-Father, instead they must have seen the Dury-text as a poem, a poetic text with a structural parallelism to the Christian prayer. It can be seen as a form of self-irony, because they know that they cannot make sure that all stops and stations are available at all times, they cannot give the public "this day our Berkhamsted", if there is construction work.[45] Neither can they "deliver anyone from Ealing". Their own information published on October 2, 2013 on YouTube was, "We've teamed up with thirteen London poets to bring 'poetiquette' to all travelers across the network."[46] Surprisingly, they did not state the author explicitly. This might be due to the fact that parodies relating to the Lord's Prayer are seen to be part of the cultural heritage which do not need citation. Their attempt at showing the famous British humor on the billboard was publicly appreciated in the Evening Standard, a London-based free newspaper which is often associated with the negative connotations of tabloids[47] but refers to the TfL notice board-lyrics rather objective. Blundy does not refer to London's religious diversity but points out that the Twitter post went viral and created an urban legend as "fans of the poster have speculated it [the image on Twitter, A. B.] may have been created using an app which allows internet users to design their own TfL notices".[48] This leads to the further distribution and reception of the parody.

It is interesting that people not only within the area of London redistribute the depicted image by "cyclinginstructor" over 100 times, even 856 times after Ben Austwick retweeted the photo. The denominations, religious beliefs and religious socialization of those who saw the billboard in the Underground as well as the retweeting

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[44] Cf. Transport for London, 'About TfL', viewed 13/02/2025 (https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/about-tfl/).

[45] Cf. Durrant, D (2020), 'London, its infrastructure and the logics of growth', pp. 93-105, in: Walks, A et al. (Ed.), *Critical dialogues of urban governance, development and activism. London and Toronto*, London: UCL Press, for the complexity of urban public transportation systems.

[46] Transport for London (2013), 'The Bus Driver's Prayer – by Ian Dury, read by Richard Purnell – #TravelBetterLondon. We've teamed up with thirteen London poets to bring 'poetiquette' to all travelers across the network. http://tfl.gov.uk/travelbetterlondon #TravelBetterLondon Richard Purnell reads Ian Dury's 'The Bus Driver's Prayer", posted on 02/10/2013, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tWJxeGV7qI).

[47] Cf. for an evaluation of the stereotypes Miller, B (2007), '"BONKS and BLIGHTY? Oh, Tabloid Britain!"', *Postmodern Culture* 17 (3). DOI: 10.1353/pmc.2008.0010 or for an overview Conboy, M & Steel, J (Ed.) (2014), *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, London: Routledge as well as Bingham, A & Conboy, M (2015), *Tabloid century. The popular press in Britain, 1896 to the present,* Oxford: Peter Lang.

[48] Blundy, 'Rocker Ian Dury's parody of the Lord's Prayer'.

Twitter users are unknown. But it is easy to see that religious basics like the Lord's Prayer are still influential enough that a poem based on it evokes a widespread communicative process. Probably the people come from a religious diverse background and address their critique of public transportation through their knowledge of religion. These religious references play a major part in modern popular culture and media. Ways of production, distribution and reception of religious transformations are various and religious congregations should be aware that not only going into a Sunday-service might evoke thoughts about questions of where we come from and where we are going – figuratively as well as literally speaking.

4. Theological relevance

This leads to the question of the overall theological relevance of this Bus Driver's poem: The popular lyrical version discussed here shows us how deeply rooted Christian traditions[49] and texts are in London, a multicultural urban city in a country that supposedly has gone through stages of pluralization and most likely through secularization over the last decades.[50] These processes of cultural and religious diversification are not only true for the British capital but also for German contexts.[51] While sometimes this transformation of society is merely perceived as a challenge for theology and religious education, the author wants to highlight aspects connected to the analysis of the poem that are not necessarily negative: Religious education must have included the Lord's Prayer in one way or another, otherwise the public display of a transformation would not attract any attention. Obviously, one cannot fathom how the parody is seen as criticism of religion from the standpoint of the individual, but the author tried to show that religion and culture are intertwined which becomes visible in this example.

The continuous existence of the Dury-text opens up the chance to reflect on the connection of religious freedom, freedom of arts, and freedom of speech.[52] It is a sign of an open, democratic society in which popular, humoristic adaptions of religious texts can be displayed publicly and spread through social media without major criti-

[49] Cf. for the relation of Christanity and popular culture Reuter, I (2020*), Der christliche Glaube im Spiegel der Popkultur,* Leipzig: EVA, 3rd ed.

[50] Cf. for overviews e.g. Meister, C (Ed.) (2011), *The Oxford handbook of religious diversity,* Oxford: OUP or Davie, G (2000), 'Religion in Modern Britain: Changing Sociological Assumptions', *Sociology* 34 (1), pp. 113-128. Cf. for more opinionated argumentations Crockett, A & Voas, D (2006), 'Generations of Decline: Religious Change in 20th-Century Britain', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45 (4), pp. 567–584 or Rietveld, E (2014), 'Debating multiculturalism and national identity in Britain: Competing frames', *Ethnicities* 14 (1), pp. 50–71.

[51] Cf. e.g. Oberlechner, M et al. (Ed.) (2019), *Religion bildet. Diversität, Pluralität, Säkularität in der Wissensgesellschaft*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

[52] Cf. Perry, M (2009), 'Liberal Democracy and the Right to Religious Freedom', *The Review of Politics* 71 (4), pp. 621–635.

cism by conservative church-representatives or a so called shit storm[53] by fundamentalists. Tolerance[54] for artistic expressions responding to biblical or liturgical texts and traditions is not necessarily self-evident because parodies and caricatures cause public discussions on questions of blasphemy even in 21st century Europe, as could for example be witnessed with the criticism of the depiction of Mohammed in the satire magazine Charlie Hebdo,[55] only to name one prominent example. Discourses on which role religion should play in public or whether the use of the sacred prayer for a supposedly trivial poem is adequate were not a part of the reception of the Dury-poem in the London Underground. But still, the display can show that it is a chance if society enables free, transformative use of religious heritage. Having advocated the fundamental right to use religious texts, one other point has to be made: Today, media – whether it be online or print[56] – is critical for religious education as religious basics and traditions are less renown within European societies.[57]

Conclusion: religious diversity in parodies of a sacred text as a chance for religious education

Parodies of the Lord's Prayer[58] can be a constructive part of religious education as, through their reception, students may develop many questions that can be construc-

[53] The colloquial, derogative term is used as a specific concept represented in social media. Cf. for the connection of viral online hatred and fundamentalism as a global phenomenon also Mankekar, P & Carlan, H (2019), 'The Remediation of Nationalism. Viscerality, Virality, and Digital Affect', in: Punathambekar, A & Mohan, S (Ed.), *Global Digital Cultures. Perspectives from South Asia*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (Perspectives from South Asia), pp. 203–222.

[54] Cf. Quinn, P (2001), 'Religious Diversity and Religious Toleration', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 50 (1/3), pp. 57–80.

[55] Cf. Balint, A & Imbert, P (2019), 'Tolerance, Secularism, Multiculturalism. *Charlie Hebdo* and *Maus*', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 52 (4), pp. 55–72.

[56] Cf. Campbell, H (2012), 'Understanding the Relationship between Religion and Offline in a Networked Society', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (1), pp. 64–93.

[57] Cf. Eisenlohr, P (2012), 'Media and Religious Diversity', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41, pp. 37–55 and Lundby, K (2017), 'Public Religion in Mediatized Transformations', pp. 241–263, in: Engelstad, F et al. (Ed.), *Institutional Change in the Public Sphere,* Berlin: De Gruyter (Views on the Nordic Model).

[58] Although only one parody has been closely analyzed here, there are other English examples that could be investigated as well, e.g. by Ernest Hemingway or Margret Atwood. Cf. Hemingway, E (1966), *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber and Other Stories*, Repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 72, "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee." and Atwood, M, *The Handmaid's Tale*, referred to by Smoker, J (2022), 'The Audacious Prayer of The Handmaid's Tale', *University of St Andrews Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts*, posted on 20/05/2022, viewed 11/09/2024 (https://www.transpositions.co.uk/the-audacious-prayer-of-the-handmaids-tale/). Further examples of parodies on the Lord's prayer with less analytical background are: 'The Landlords' Prayer, Parody

tive for discourse in a religious diverse setting[59]. Texts like the Underground-poem derived from Dury's music version might be more closely connected to the life of secularized students than the origin, as they witness them during their everyday-media-consumption. Therefore, it is sensible for teachers if the use of popular poetry, literature and other types of media in religious education is enhanced.[60] Competence in reflecting media is one goal for German religious education that should be continuously established. The same is true for tolerance and awareness of religious freedom as major learning goals in school which can, for example, be rehearsed by looking at parodies of the Lord's Prayer. Through parodies, the pupils notice the difference between religious speech and language, on the one hand, and talk about religion, on the other hand.[61] The reciprocal influence of religion and culture is implemented in the curricula in North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, as it is a necessary skill to develop a reflective, independent perspective on both religion and culture.

One of the core goals of religious education in German schools is to teach the pupils religious freedom, both positively – having the liberty to practice one's belief – as well as negatively – having the liberty to be critical or independent of a particular confession/denomination or specific religious bonds. This concept is based on Article 4 of the German constitution. This implies that pupils should learn step by step to evaluate Christian traditions and rituals and their transformations in culture and society. As the curricula in North Rhine-Westphalia nowadays are competence-based,

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Song Lyrics of Jesus', viewed 13/02/2025 (http://www.amiright.com/parody/misc/jesus0.shtml), "The lords Prayer. Our lager, Which art from heaven. Hammered be thy aim. Thy will be drunk. I will be drunk. At home as it is in tavern. Give us this day our foamy head. And forgive us our spillages, as we forgive those who spilleth against us. Lead us not into temptation of poncy wine tasting, but deliver us from alco-pops. For thine is the yeast, the hops, and the barley, for ever and ever. Barmen." Also cf. N. N.: The Witness Pages – The Lord's Prayer Skit. on underlined parts: act like you are praying, viewed 13/02/2025 (https://witnessdragon.tripod.com/lordprayerskit.htm), "**Prayer**: Our Father which art in heaven, **God**: Yes? **Prayer**: Don't interrupt me. I'm praying **God**: But you called me **Prayer**: Called you? I didn't call you. I'm praying. Our Father which art in heaven, **God**: There you did it again **Prayer**: Did what?" **God**: Called me. You said, "Our Father which art in heaven." Here I am. What's on your mind? **Prayer**: But I didn't mean anything by it. I was, you know, just saying my prayers for the day. I always say the Lord's Prayer. It makes me feel good, kind of like getting a duty done." **God**: All right. Go on. […]".

59 Cf. sources of diversity-sensitive religious education research e.g. Nord, I & Petzke, J (Ed.) (2023), *Fachdidaktik Religion. Diversitätsorientiert und digital*, Berlin: Cornelsen. Also: Kaupp, A (Ed.) (2018), *Pluralitätssensible Schulpastoral. Chancen und Herausforderungen angesichts religiöser und kultureller Diversität*, Ostfildern: Matthias Grünewald or Barnes, P (2014), *Education, religion and diversity. Developing a new model of religious education*, London, New York: Routledge.

60 Cf. e.g. Willebrand, E (2016), *Literarische Texte in Religionsbüchern. Zwischen Verkündigung, Erfahrungsspiegelung und Erschließung religiöser Tiefen,* Bad Heilbrunn: Klinkhardt or Zimmermann, M et al. (Ed.) (2013), *Handbuch Bibeldidaktik*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

61 Cf. Dressler, B (2012), "Religiös reden" und "über Religion reden" lernen – Religionsdidaktik als Didaktik des Perspektivenwechsels', pp. 68–78, in: Grümme, B et al. (Ed.), *Religionsunterricht neu denken. Innovative Ansätze und Perspektiven der Religionsdidaktik. Ein Arbeitsbuch*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

this means that each pupil should be able to understand that there are different ways of religious expression. One way to express an opinion on religion can be transforming a prayer into a contextual poem. Pupils face different religious attitudes in their surrounding environment all the time. In order to deal with these different attitudes, they depend on their ability to respect others' faith-boundaries as well as to question whether their own approach towards religion is the only possible way. All of these goals can be tackled by implementing parodies of the Lord's Prayer into religious education in schools. One needs to be aware that, in order to achieve these goals, pupils must have a high level of comprehension and abstraction. But at secondary schools, the Lord's Prayer and its reception can be dealt with in religious education. All in all, it is inspiring to broaden the theological horizon not only in religious education in schools but also in higher education by analyzing and discussing parodies on the Lord's Prayer and other common biblical and liturgical texts like the Ten Commandments, Psalm 23 or the *Hail Mary*.

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Contributors

Claudia D. Bergmann is a Professor for Biblical Studies at Paderborn University (Germany). Her most recent book is *Festmahl ohne Ende: Apokalyptische Vorstellungen vom Speisen in der Kommenden Welt im antiken Judentum und ihre biblischen Wurzeln* (Kohlhammer, 2019); her most recent coedited book (with Thomas R. Blanton IV) is entitled *Imitating Abraham. Ritual and Exemplarity in Jewish and Christian Contexts* (Brill, 2025). She currently studies the reception history of the biblical figure Hagar.

Anne Breckner works as a Research Associate in the Department of Protestant Theology at Paderborn University (Germany). She completed her PhD on parodies of the Lord's Prayer in January 2025, the monograph is entitled Breckner, A (2025), *Vaterunser-Parodien in Kontinuität und Wandel. Theologische und kulturwissenschaftliche Analysen*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS. Her research interests and publications deal with various aspects within the field of practical and historical theology, e.g. the connection between popular culture and religion, as well as the reception of biblical themes in songs, school and carnival or other popular rituals.

Edwin Delen is a PhD Researcher at the Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (Brussels). He is a member of the Practical Theology department and teaches Church Order and Diversity.

Peter Derie is an Arabist and scholar of religion affiliated with Ghent University and the Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (Brussels) as an independent researcher. Specializing in the theology and history of the Qur'ān, he has published several books on the theology and history of the Qur'ān.

Birger Falcke works as a pastor in the Evangelische Kirche von Westfalen, which is part of the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland. In June 2025, he defended his dissertation at Paderborn University. In it, he reflects on the relationship between parochial and non-parochial forms of congregation from a recognition theory perspective and highlights new options for church reform and church leadership.

Kelly Keasberry is a PhD Researcher at the Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (Brussels). She specializes in eco-theology and works as freelance journalist and theologian.

Mathias Kissel has a Palestinian and German background. He is a trained musician and theologian. He is involved in parish ministry as an ordained minister in the Protestant Church and as an ordained Deacon in the Anglican Church. His main field of scientific research lies in the field of hermeneutics in the areas of music and theology, biblical studies and Muslim-Jewish-Christian dialogue. He is currently teaching as a substitute professor at the University of Bielefeld (Germany) and has just published a comprehensive study on intertextual hermeneutics in music (*Vollendung und Fragment – Eine musiktheologische Hermeneutik,* Metzler-Verlag).

Syvonia Pang Shiu Man is a PhD Researcher at the Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (Brussels). She is from Chinese origin and lived in Hong Kong, now in Taiwan. She specializes in pastoral care in crisis situations.

Jan Christian Pinsch is a Research Associate in Church History at the Institute of Protestant Theology at Paderborn University and lecturer in Church History in the Department of Theology at Bielefeld University. He finished his PhD on German Bible Belts and the relationship between group-focused enmity and the Christian Right in September 2025. It is scheduled to be published in spring 2026. He also published the book *Religiöse Feindbilder. Bausteine für die Sekundarstufe II* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023, with Oliver Arnold and Stephanie Lerke) and several essays. His academic interests include anti-Semitism, Culture of Remembrance, Christian Fundamentalism und Religious Othering.

Harald Schroeter-Wittke is a Professor for Religious Education and Church History at Paderborn University (Germany). He is a member of the presidium of the Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag. He has published on Kirchentag, homiletics, liturgy and worship, performative religious education, religion and pop-culture, entertainment and musical church history. He likes to perform music and design games.

Johan Temmerman is the dean of the Faculty for Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (FPTR) in Brussels as well as the chair holder Religious Studies. He was the editor of *Religious Radicalism. Demarcations and Challenges* (Academic and Scientific Publishers, 2012) and published several books on Science and Religion, Religious populism, and Philosophy of Religion.

Jo Jan Vandenheede is a Lutheran pastor currently ministering in the Episcopal parish in Waterloo (Belgium) while writing his PhD at the Faculty for Protestant Theology and Religious Studies (FPTR) in Brussels and teaching. He has published on Anglicanism and Lutheranism and their historic as well as present-day relations. His academic interests include Church History, ecumenism, and diversity.

Jan Van Reeth has a PhD in Linguistics and Literature (Latin and Greek) and is a Professor of History of Religion and Islamic Theology at FPTR. His research focuses on late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in the Middle East, in recent years focusing on the (Christian and Jewish) sources and the editorial history of the Qur'ān. He wrote significant contributions to the recent Qur'ān commentary *Le Coran des Historiens* (Paris, Le Cerf 2019). He also published a book on Arabic theology: *Kalâm. Arabisch denken over God en wereld* (Antwerp, Garant, 2011).

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