Authenticity of Faith and Interreligious Dialogue

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1. Tolerance and Truth in Interreligious Dialogue

The relationship between tolerance and truth is a key issue for interreligious dialog. But it is also a key question for the world as a whole. Countless wars have been waged, terrible violence has been caused, because the demand for truth has taken the place of tolerance. Truth – according to the underlying attitude – must be enforced, whatever the cost. In the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century, it was the Christian denominations in whose name people killed each other. Today, it is often a perverted understanding of jihad, of holy war, that leads to terror and violence in the name of Islam.

Recently the notion of holy war was also promoted by a body, which sees itself as protector of Christianity. The World Russian People's Council, chaired by the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Kirill published a statement at its meeting in Moscow on March 27 and 28, 2024, which interprets the Russian invasion in Ukraine as a „Holy War:" „From a spiritual and moral point of view", it says,

> „a special military operation is a Holy War, in which Russia and its people, defending the single spiritual space of Holy Rus', fulfill the mission of 'Holding', protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism."

And it continues: „After the completion of the Northeast Military District, the entire territory of modern Ukraine should enter the zone of

exclusive influence of Russia." Military aggression against a neighboring country is justified here by religious language. As in so many cases in history intolerance becomes violent in the name of truth.

A widespread counter-reaction to such truth claims justifying violence, which have caused so much suffering in world history, is skepticism towards the truth as such in the name of tolerance. Claims to truth come under suspicion because the connection between truth claims and intolerance are seen as intrinsic. Together with truth claims, religions that make such truth claims become suspicious or are even seen as the driving force of intolerance and violence as its consequence.

Is everything equally true? This question can certainly not be answered with a simple yes. After all, it is obvious that certain statements about God simply contradict each other. Christian talk of the Trinity of God, for example, differs clearly – at least at first glance – from the emphasis on the unity and unavailability of God in the two other monotheistic religions of Judaism and Islam, in which talk of the divinity of the man Jesus Christ will at first cause offense.

Ralf Wüstenberg, in his book on Islam, emphasizes many convergences between Christianity and Islam. While his account of their relationship is very inclusive, he clearly identifies differences such as the unconditional loving dedication of God by becoming human in Jesus Christ and giving himself to heal humanity (cf. Wüstenberg 2016, 207–209).

It is clear that there are different truths. The central question is how we deal with such different truths. Time and again, we have failed to deal appropriately with different truths, not the least in the area of religion. We so often try to strengthen our own profile by devaluing and then often distorting others. This approach is, however, always a sign of inner weakness. After all, such devaluation or even distortion of others reveals a lack of trust in the convincing force of one's own faith. Self-confidence does not need devaluation of others. That is why an authentic explanation of one's own faith always includes a fair and competent presentation of other worldviews. An accurate account of other worldviews is depen-

dent on dialog. After all, no one can better support the accuracy of an interpretation of other worldviews than those who represent it themselves.

It is crucial that we take note of each other in our different interpretations of the world and – more than that – that we are also in conversation with each other. Because in an open, pluralistic society, the ability to explain one's own understanding of reality in conversation with others is of central importance. This also applies to the discussion between religious and non-religious interpretations of the world. After all, religious attitudes are only one part of the worldview cosmos of pluralistic societies. If faith does not want to cultivate hermeticism, special semantics and niche existence, it must face up to communication with other forms of understanding of the world. In a religiously and ideologically pluralistic society, this task is more important than ever. Today we have to make content plausible to those who think differently in terms of religion or ideology, content that appears to them to be either downright absurd or, in any case, largely incomprehensible.

Plausibilizations are not only based on rational argument. Rather, they can unfold their power precisely when they also appeal to the heart and soul. For our testimony as Christians, it is crucial that we ourselves radiate what we are talking about.

There is a clear necessity to give an account of which orientation theology can give for this challenge. To engage in this effort, I want to assess four different theological concepts of interreligious dialogue and further explore the last one.

2. Theological Concepts of Interreligious Dialogue

a) Christocentric Exclusivism

Christocentric exclusivism affirms the central importance of Jesus Christ for Christian faith. But beyond that, it considers the witness of

Jesus Christ and other forms of faith as mutually exclusive. A famous verse from the gospel of John is often quoted: 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me' (Jn 14,6). This verse is seen as a clear indication that the explicit confession of Christ is the only way to God and that all those who do not confess Christ are lost.

It is obvious that such an interpretation of the verse in John and a theological position based on it leads to a very specific understanding of interreligious dialogue. The primary goal of such dialogue, whether hidden or open, is conversion to Christian faith. Those who take this position tend to defend a legal church state framework which – if at all possible – privileges Christian faith.

b) Pluralistic Theology of Religion

Pluralistic theology of religion is based on a critique of universal religious truth claims.[1] It reacts to the undisputable history of intolerance and even violence resulting from such truth claims with a radical contextualization of each religious faith. We are formed by our historically contingent upbringing. If we are born in India we might be Hindu. If we are born in Myanmar we might be Buddhist. If we are born in Indonesia we are probably Muslim, and if we are born in Germany, the United States or Brazil, we are probably Christian. Each one of us can only see a part of the truth. The whole can only be approached if we embrace the richness and diversity of different religious views.

Strong truth claims are seen as a nurturing ground for intolerance and therefore as something to be overcome. Constitutional law must allow each one's choice of religious practices.

1 For an assessment of this position, cf. Lienemann-Perrin 1999, 136–60.

This position has a certain tendency towards privatization of religion, for public truth claims are seen as a threat for a culture of pluralism.

c) Moral Credibility Approach (Ring Parable)

The third view can be called the 'moral credibility approach'. Lessing's ring parable is a witness of this approach. It basically expresses the conviction that the truth of a religion can be seen in its moral credibility. A religion which generates hate and intolerance cannot be a true religion. God is love, and therefore, God can only be at work in a religion which leads to an authentic witness of this love on earth.

Church-state relations would be designed in a way which encourages moral agency in the whole of society.

d) Trinitarian Inclusivism – Authenticity of the Church in Interreligious Dialogue

Trinitarian inclusivism emphasizes the strengths of some of the other approaches without including its weaknesses. This is the approach I want to argue for. Trinitarian inclusivism implies a passionate witness to the Trinitarian God which is clearly distinctive from other religious convictions. In this perspective a passionate authentic witness is needed. It rejects an understanding of pluralism which assumes that truth claims generate intolerance and that truth claims weaken pluralism. Rather, it affirms that pluralism lives from passionate and truth-oriented contributions to discourse. Intolerance, in this perspective, is not generated by strong truth claims but by an inability to respect and honor the strong truth claims of others.

My thesis is that Trinitarian theology is extremely fruitful for an interreligious dialogue which avoids both relativism and absolutism.

If we confess God – in the first person of trinity – as the creator, we affirm that there is only one God. If we pray to God the creator, we

express that this one God has worked and works and will work in this world. If non-Christians pray to God, they cannot pray to some other God coexisting with the God Christians pray to. There are clearly contradictory claims between different religions. For example the claim of Judaism and Islam that God is so much beyond any human imagery that it can never be visible in a human being is hard to reconcile with the Christian claim that God has revealed Godself in a human being who died on the cross and was resurrected and rose into heaven and is alive beyond the limits of earthly time.

There is a tension between these different views which cannot be overcome by subjectifying faith. That is why the moral credibility approach is not satisfying. Thus, the real challenge is: not to ignore this tension but explore how we can constructively deal with this tension.

This is where Christology comes in. The problem of Christological exclusivism is not that it is too christological but that it is not christological enough. Confessing Christ means loving radically. Loving radically implies an attitude of respect and appreciation to every other human being which only finds its limit in the ignorance towards such respect and appreciation. In other words: there is no respect for disrespect, there is no tolerance for intolerance.

The horizon of the double commandment of love does not end at the limits of a particular religion. Radically loving the neighbor means valuing the religious views, which are so crucial for his or her very existence. Therefore, it is exactly radical faith in Christ which is the source of the curiosity for the religious beliefs of others that we need as a basis for interreligious dialogue.

This love-driven curiosity is a work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is one with God the Creator and with Christ. The Holy Spirit inflames this love in us which Christ stands for. And the Holy Spirit is the one who can generate the miracle of understanding each other despite completely different languages. The most fascinating aspect of the Pentecost story Acts 2,1–11 is this movement of communication which reconciles the di-

versity of different cultures with the one language creating the community of the spirit which we call church (cf. Welker 1992, 218). This vision entails the promise of understanding each other even beyond the limits of our own religious traditions.

What does this approach of Trinitarian Inclusivism mean for religion in public life? What does it mean for the rules that are binding for every citizen in a state?

In the following I will not reflect upon all possible forms of government in relation to religion. I will limit myself to the public role of religion in the liberal state. In a theocratic state, the role of religion is clearly defined as the extended arm of a certain government which tries to secure the authority of one particular religion coercively by preventing anyone from living a life without religion or with a religion diverging from the ruling worldview. In an atheist state, the role of religion is equally clear, namely by being nonexistent in any institutional form. The government tries to suppress all expressions of religion by its own authority, because it sees religion either as a dying phenomenon or as a danger for peoples' development into citizens of a commonwealth that moves beyond religious illusions. Freedom of religion is seen as a threat to such development.

In both forms the government guarantees social cohesion and people's loyalty to the state, if necessary, by force. The liberal state is in a different situation. If it demanded a certain conception of the good, like a religious one, from its people by force, it would cease to be liberal. If there were no conceptions of the good alive among its people, the liberal state would lose its viability and its social cohesion in the long run.

In 1967, the German Supreme Court justice Ernst Wolfgang Böckenförde has described this dilemma in words that have made a quote carrier in the German speaking academic world as well as in the political world, which is rather unique. Meanwhile it is simply called the 'Böckenförde dilemma': „The liberal secular state lives from sources it cannot

guarantee itself"[2] (Böckenförde 1967, 93; cf. Böckenförde 2013, 183.308 f.; Vögele 1994, 183.309).[3] The dilemma behind this phrase consists of the following two alternatives: either the liberal state ignores religion and thus runs the danger of losing its cohesive forces. Or it promotes religion with the risk of losing its neutrality in religious affairs.

How should we react to the challenge placed by this dilemma? To simply trust that there will be enough forces of cohesion in society in the future as there have been in the past is not enough. If traditions like Christianity as a source of cohesion in the former Christian state erode more and more and make place for a culture of individualism based on patchwork religion, the leftover cohesive forces of society might largely be based on spiritual resources of the past which are more and more being used up. What, then, will the future bring? Which kind of new sources will nurture the involvement of the citizens needed in every democratic society?

With these questions we are in the middle of the problems connected with the role of religion in a liberal pluralistic democracy.

3. Public Religion in a Pluralistic Democracy

There are various ways to define the relationship between religion and state. I will only describe four of them.[4]

2 For this article, German quotations have been translated into English.

3 Later Böckenförde explicitly related to his phrase from almost thirty years before and reaffirmed it: 'Meine nahezu vor 30 Jahren formulierte These: „Der freiheitliche säkulare Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann, ohne seine Freiheitlichkeit in Frage zu stellen" halte ich nach wie vor für richtig (Böckenförde 1996, 89).'

4 I further develop here an account of these models given in Bedford-Strohm 2018, 23–44.

One could favor a model of *civil religion* in which a state is based on a weak form of religion which uses the 'God word' so widely that all citizens can find themselves under this roof. However, atheists will never want to walk under this roof. And the danger of misuse is high. It is not difficult to collect quotes, especially from American presidents, legitimizing a policy with God which would be in deep tension with specific theological claims. This is why Robert Bellah, the creator of the notion of civil religion, began to speak of 'public theology' in the Reagan years of the 1980s (cf. Bellah 1975).

One could also speak of the *'Christian Occident'* and therefore give special legal privileges to Christian religion. But this would ignore the deep difference between Christian faith and a cultural notion of Christianity. The cultural notion of Christian Occident stands not only for the story of Jesus Christ but also for its complete denial in confessional wars, crusades, the killing of millions of Native Americans and the effort to completely annihilate Judaism in Europe. The concept of Christian Occident presupposes a direct synthesis of 'Christ and culture' (Niebuhr 1951), which is deeply questioned by an honest look at history.

One could furthermore speak of *religion as a private matter* trying to keep it out of the public space. This view has often been based on a certain interpretation of what sociology has called 'secularization theory'.[5] The privatization of religion is, however, philosophically not plausible. If secularization means religious neutrality of the state, there is no convincing reason to privilege any religious or nonreligious worldview in the public realm. Why would philosophical standpoints deserve public expression and religious views not?

A fourth model which I simply call *'public religion'* seems much more promising when it comes to the rules which must be followed if different

5 For the basic ideas of this theory, cf. Casanova 1994, 11–39.

religions are supposed to live together peacefully. I therefore want to go into this model in more detail.

The American philosopher John Rawls has given a framework for such a model which can be seen as the legal expression of the mutual affirmation of tolerance and pluralism on one hand and strong truth claims on the other hand which I have described in the notion of Trinitarian inclusivism. In his 1987 essay 'The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus', in which he clarifies some points that had been too vague in his theory of justice from 1971, Rawls makes very clear that religion does have a public role (cf. Rawls 1987, 6; Rawls 1999, 427). What Rawls stands for, is liberalism as a thin conception of the good. Liberalism as a 'thin' conception of the good only tries to design the basic structure of society in a way that allows all the 'thick' conceptions of the good (like religions) to find an optimal framework for a lively and fruitful debate. The objection that such liberalism is skeptical of religious and philosophical truth, or indifferent to their values, says Rawls, is mistaken (cf. Rawls 1999, 447). For liberalism as a thin conception of the good, strong religious or philosophical convictions are not to be banned to the private realm. On the contrary: as long as they are compatible with the overlapping consensus that is expressed in the constitution, they can be something like life-givers to pluralism in a democratic society. For Rawls, such comprehensive doctrines, whether they are religious or non-religious, are the 'vital social basis' of reasonable political conceptions, 'giving them enduring strength and vigor' (cf. Rawls 1999, 592).

These different philosophical or religious contributions should normally be presented in a language that is understandable to other traditions as well. But Rawls goes even further and sees contributions to the public debate by religious traditions *in their own language* as sometimes crucial for the development of a pluralistic society, and he quotes the Christian involvement against slavery in the nineteenth century and Martin Luther King's involvement in the civil rights movement as examples (cf. Rawls 1999, 592). It is, however, decisive for such contributions

that good political reasons confirm what is expressed on the basis of a comprehensive moral doctrine. In the case of the Abolitionists and of the Civil Rights movement this proviso was fulfilled, 'however much they emphasized the religious roots of their doctrines, because these doctrines supported basic constitutional values – as they themselves asserted – and so supported reasonable conceptions of political justice' (Rawls 1999, 593).[6]

Rawls also sees a place for biblical language in public. He explicitly stresses the value of the public use of the biblical parable of the Good Samaritan and adds: „citizens of faith who cite the Gospel parable of the Good Samaritan do not stop there, but go on to give a public justification for this parable's conclusions in terms of political values" (Rawls 1999, 594).

These examples make very clear that Rawls, at least in his later works, is far from limiting religion to a private realm. On the contrary, he sees reasonable comprehensive doctrines of religion as viable and precious agents in the public culture of a democratic society.[7] The same can be said of the late Habermas (cf. Bedford-Strohm 2018, 34–36) and of the thinking of German ethicist Wolfgang Huber[8].

I hope that it has become clear why this constitutional framework is especially compatible with the Trinitarian Inclusivism as I have tried to

6 Rawls adds in a footnote: 'I do not know whether the Abolitionists and King thought of themselves as fulfilling the purpose of the proviso. But whether they did or not, they could have. And had they known and accepted the idea of public reason, they would have' (Rawls 1999, 593, n. 54).

7 The first theologian who has really honored this endorsement of the public role of religion by Rawls is Ronald Thiemann in his brilliant book: Thiemann 1996, 80–90. Thiemann gives a thorough and sharp account of Rawls' development in this respect.

8 Cf. Wolfgang Hubers notion of 'Begründungsoffenheit' (openness to different justifications), in Huber 2006, 269–320. See also his concept of 'relative universality' which honors both the contextual and the universal character of human rights and human dignity, cf. Huber 1996, 146.

describe it. It honors the equal right of different expressions of faith. At the same time, it defines limits beyond which religious views cannot be lived out publically. Human rights are the expression of the overlapping consensus of modern democratic societies.

They are the legal expression of those consequences of Trinitarian inclusivism which we have described. Love and respect for the other and the curiosity for his or her religious or philosophical views form the communicative basis of interreligious dialogue. A constitutional framework, which gives religious views that are reconcilable with the overlapping consensus of human rights the opportunity of public expression, is the legal basis of it.

4. Conclusion: Public Theology as a Force of Peace by the Religions and between the Religions

If we take seriously what my considerations mean for public life, we come to a twofold conclusion. *On the side of religion*, efforts must be intensified to develop a public theology of the religions. In order to appropriately express themselves in public all religions are well advised to develop such a public theology.[9] A *public theology of Islam* would intensify critical reflection on its own traditions and their ambivalences as it is the task of Christian public theology as well. It could make a valuable contribution to reconciliation and the overcoming of violence in national societies and worldwide.[10] A *public theology of Judaism* could reflect upon the theology of land, its possible misunderstandings and its possible tensions with a human rights approach which is expressed in international law.

9 For an example of a comparative view see: Barua 2013. Such a public theology of religions would also include assessing their potential for motivating community involvement. See Fulton&Wood 2012.

10 See, for example: Tonneau 2016 and Abbas 2016.

It could thereby contribute to the opening of new doors in dealing with the conflict in the Holy Land which seems so locked.[11] *Christian public theology* can continue to develop a notion of humility which applies to countries and most to those who have the most power.[12]

On the side of society the conclusion of my argument is that trying to keep religion out of public life is counterproductive for a lively pluralism. Public presence of religion in the sense described can invigorate public discourse on political questions which involve moral issues. It will have an enlightening effect on such discussions. And it will prevent those in the religious communities who preach intolerance or even violence from gaining more influence.

My hope is that through intensified interreligious dialogue and through vivid engagement in public discourse religions can contribute to living a vision of peace and reconciliation which is at the core of all witness to God and which is also the driving force of Ralf Wüstenberg's theology.[13] Our world needs such passion for peace and reconciliation desperately.

5. Literatur

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11 For already existing efforts of this kind see the special issue of IJPT on Jewish Public Theology (2013).

12 This was one of my goals in my inaugural lecture at the university of Bamberg in 2004 (cf. Bedford-Strohm 2005).

13 Cf., as an example for many other publications, Wüstenberg 2004.

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