

as if drawn by salt. But it, too, was licked by the cool tongues of the waves.

Something was changed in him. The world suddenly grew strange. A world in which the eagle hurls itself from the wild heights to sate his hunger on helpless creatures. A world that falls to rise, consuming life that life, itself, might be renewed. A world in which nothing lasts forever, save anguish.

He hated the rocks because the biting water gnaws on them until finally they slip into the abyss. He hated the woods because rot treacherously attacks the roots of the tree and the thunder hammers it into the swamp where a thousand years hide it in the coal reserves of the Earth. He hated the falling stars and the flowing river that disappeared into the sea, and the sea itself, which ends on another, however distant, shore. Now, he knew it for certain.

“Love needs eternity.”

Irony Divine. He had looked for eternity and found love. He looked for love and found eternity.

He recognised, for the first time, a different world stretching out invisibly above him; a separate, Godly existence that is not bound to anything which dances its cruel dance in the circles of birth and extinction. He beheld the Almighty with awakened consciousness. His revived heart experienced a mysterious touch.

From the cave beneath the ridge he carried a boat, unused for ages. With a bare chest he sailed toward the sun. The dolmen of the stone temple consecrated to the God-of-the-Self-Most-High diminished in the distance. He turned his face to Heaven and looked up at the place which cannot be seen. And love remained with him always.

Sören ASMUS

Dialogue as Unlimited Interpretation

In comparing and evaluating religious traditions, is it more important to be committed to at least one of them or detached from all of them? The task of comparing and evaluating becomes most relevant in an encounter with other religious traditions facing a common reality, problem or concern and being dependent on the development of a common (re-) action. In this situation there is no alternative to a commitment to one's own religious (cultural or philosophical) tradition, because it is on this basis every action and analysis will be contributed.

I. The Place of the Question

In the wide area of possible dialogues between people, the question of oneself and others – basically beliefs and convictions – is the most important and at the same time the most difficult question to ask.

If we move in the area of dialogue between people of different religious traditions – be it Christian or other – the question is that of hopes, aims and values, which open the horizon of the individual towards her or his own future and the future of humankind.¹

At the same time, these traditions shape the way in which the individual experiences her or his life and expresses those experiences towards others.² Difficulties arise if those expressions are not in line with one's own expressions of such experiences – be it because of different experiences or because of different expressions.

In order to relate those expressions to one's own view and experiences of the world, there must be either a comparison or an

¹ A good exploration of the involved questions: NEWBIGIN Leslie, *The Basis, Purpose and Manner of Interfaith Dialogue*. Scottish Journal of Theology (SJTh) XXX/19. 253–270.

² See the summary of views on doctrine: LINDBECK George A., *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. London, 1984. 73–90.

evaluation of those views, in order to build them into one's own pattern of perceiving reality.

In the realm of academic discourse, it is possible to try and approach religious traditions with an analytical set of values that are not derived from religious backgrounds or are explicitly critical towards all religious claims, like Ludwig FEUERBACH or Karl MARX. Emil DURKHEIM and Max WEBER, for example, tried to develop an independent way of looking at religion, regardless of their personal commitment to a religious tradition.

But in the academic realm, as well as in any other area of life, people have developed their own worldviews in order to make sense of their existence and the world they see around them. People rooted in religious traditions will derive their worldview from their religious patterns of explaining the world and the meaning of life.

II. Postmodern Views and Religious Views

Postmodernism explains worldviews as *narratives constructed to make sense out of existence*. All narratives are fundamentally the same; they are mainly the ways we choose to look at the world.

Their greater or lesser acceptance lies not in the way they are more or less accurate in their representation of the world as it is, but in that they are more or less powerful. In such a view, any hope for an acceptable working foundation for a common view, or ultimately for even a temporary description, of the aim or reality of the world is gone.

For religious traditions, this means they are no longer able to claim to provide a meta-narrative for explaining the world in general, as nothing is able to claim this.³ This would mean an end to any religious claim of a universal salvation or an aim in life addressed to all humanity and revealed in special historical circumstances (Jesus Christ, Buddha or Mohammed), and therefore it does not seem acceptable either.

On the other hand, we must admit that plurality and contradictory experiences of the transcendent lead to very different narratives in our own traditions, as well as in other religious traditions.

In such a situation, we would like to suggest regarding religious tradition as a *cumulative reflection of the praxis of faith*⁴ with an

³ We draw on Paul O'SHEA's summary here: O'SHEA Paul, *Theology, Pluralism and Postmodernity*. Milltown Studies 1995. 32–42.

⁴ This draws on John D'ARCY MAY's description of identity: D'ARCY MAY John, *Essence, Identity, Liberation: Three Ways of Looking at Christianity*. Religious Traditions 1984. 34–37.



endless, but not arbitrary, possibility of interpretation, which is to be justified and shaped by the believing individual herself or himself in an ongoing expanding network of relationships.

One's own praxis and experience of faith is shaped by historically provided patterns of expressions and reflections (e.g. Christian theology) and in its ongoing existence through the relationships and the communication one has; it shapes the future with added expressions and reflections.⁵

All these expressions do not contain a single, definite meaning, but they can and must be interpreted in every situation to make them relevant. There is no limitation on the different numbers of such interpretations, although the direction of the interpretations is not arbitrary.

Umberto ECO's concept of semiotics and its application to texts is the following: "To say that a text is potentially unlimited does not mean that every act of interpretation is justified."⁶ We think that in a wide understanding of life as being a text in its own right, this applies to our worldviews and reality as well.

So there is no such claim as a valid meta-narrative in general, but rather the common experience of people of different traditions that their narrative makes their life meaningful and enables them to act, and that they share at least a common direction of these narratives. The importance of the community for the identity of the individual is summarised by Brad J. KALLENBERG, with reference to Alistair MACINTYRE, as follows:

"People can only answer 'Who am I?' with reference to the roles they perform or the characters they play in the narrative of the community. Everybody embodies a story and all stories overlap. One is always someone's child, someone else's cousin, and someone else's neighbour: 'For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.'"

Brad J. KALLENBERG uses this description in the view of conversion, but gives in his text some interesting analyses of postmodern theory and its application to Christian (Evangelical-Lutheran) theology.⁷

If they refrain from the claim of universal validity for their narrative, each individual must prove to herself or himself the sufficiency of the narrative and the will to communicate this to others.

5 We have developed the theological concept behind this in the *Essay on Cathrine M. LaCugna's "God for Us"* under the heading *Ecumenical implications*.

6 ECO Umberto, *Die Grenzen der Interpretation*. München, 1995. 22.

7 KALLENBERG Brad J., *Conversion Converted: A Postmodern Formulation of the Doctrine of Conversion*. The Evangelical Quarterly 1995/4. 349.

In that sense it does not matter at all whether the narrative is 'religious' or 'scientific'; what matters is that the narrative works for the person and that the person is able to communicate it properly.

Within Christian theology, the development of advocacy hermeneutics in the recent years has shown that even within a religious tradition the number of possible interpretations of the dominant narrative and the different distinguishable narratives sometimes can no longer be brought into a single concept.

This meets experiences from the side of interreligious dialogue, where even a common 'religious experience of the Most High Being we adore' seems not to exist at all; it becomes so abstract that it becomes meaningless at the same time.

So, as Richard RORTY put it in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the sustaining of the conversation becomes a sufficient aim of philosophy or of any theology or of religious reflection in general.⁸

III. Religious Traditions in Today's World

We think that the emerging development in our world, the different areas of interrelationship in global economies, a threatened global environment and a newly emerging (mostly oppressive and violent) world order gives us many reasons to develop patterns of relation in order to face these common problems.

On the local level as well, most (Western) European societies develop multi-cultural areas of life, in which people of different religious and cultural backgrounds meet and face common problems.

In such situations a common praxis is needed to deal with the problems and with each other. This is exactly the area in which our different narratives and our different expressions of our religious traditions matter.

Of course there is still a possibility for abstract reflection on religious traditions, and in that a detached approach to religious traditions remains possible. The outcome of such reflection and comparison or valuation may be useful and provide interesting insights.

But the aim of such an approach easily becomes a matter of instrumental reason in order to control the observed traditions, which in our view is dubious in the long run. Thus there are areas suited to such an approach, but they are very limited compared with the huge task of relating one's views and beliefs every day to other people and common problems.

8 O'SHEA Paul, *Theology, Pluralism and Postmodernity*. Milltown Studies, 1995. 36.

In such a common struggle, the different values and meanings of our religious traditions are compared through the important questions we commonly face and the answers we are able to provide.

The normative measure of comparison, then, no longer lies in an external authority or an absolutised narrative. It lies in the ability of different people from different backgrounds or with different traditions to develop a common praxis within this world that is meaningful to them and allows them to reflect on this praxis together.

Facing the threat of low intensity and middle intensity conflicts as a dominant pattern of international politics, religious traditions will have to provide answers and the communities facing such threats will need to find common answers in order to survive.

Facing a global economy which is dominated by structures that make the majority of humans suffer, we have to see which answers our beliefs and their traditions provide, in order to change or sustain such patterns.⁹

In Western societies a certain degree of community and mutual dependence has developed within 'multicultural' societies. Life has to be organised: education, work, leisure and religious expressions.

There is a need to develop forms that are neither offensive or exclusive for majorities and minorities, nor ignorant about common tasks. In this mutual exchange cultural and religious expressions become highly questioned, and the pressures of everyday life do not allow for abstract solutions.

The different religious and cultural commitments have to be related to one another in order to develop an appropriate attitude towards the pluralist reality of social and global communities. In this process exchange will necessarily take place, and thereby one's own perception will be changed or transformed.¹⁰

IV. Limitations: Mission and Syncretism

Many more examples could be given, but I would rather focus on two aspects that necessarily question such an approach. The first is the question of truth claims and mission, or comparable concepts.

The point at stake is whether a tradition and belief that makes our

life meaningful and refers to a tradition of narratives which claim to explain the world and life and their aims can ultimately adopt such a view.

Furthermore, there is the question of whether mission, or the spreading and promoting of such a view, can be justified. The only possible answer for this seems to be that such truth claims or worldviews have to prove their value for each person individually.

Thus it is the personal congruence with the claims of the narrative that makes it persuasive or some kind of revelation to the individual, which is not disposable.¹¹ So in that sense the problems that are faced do not change; they are only described differently.

The second question is that of syncretism or even heresy (in Christian terms): the simple facts that common praxis and common reflection will lead to a new narrative. The fact that our life together will lead to transformed perceptions of our own traditions and faith, will lead to ever-changing narratives.

That will put the threat of incoherence into our narrative and could lead to a split from the dominant patterns within our traditions. Syncretism can be described as the attempt to put together new combinations of narratives in order to be able to act sensibly in the future of a rapidly changing social situation.

Hermann P. SILLER's description of *syncretism* in an anthropological view is the following: "Humans in a situation of extreme alienation and questioning of their own identity try to overcome this productively. When their old cultural and religious patterns fail or are dubious, they have to create a new meaning for their life out of a set of contradictory factors and parts of thought. This must be shaped in such a way that it allows them to act meaningfully again."¹²

In that sense, the approach described above emphasises the necessity of mutual interrelatedness. Our own narrative is shaped by the community in which it was developed and from which we have inherited its expressions and grammars.

If we meet people with more or less basically different narratives, and if in a common struggle we relate our narratives to each other and thereby change, we are still members of the community that shaped our narrative in the first place.

9 See on the question of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue and their relation to the struggles of the world: D'ARCY MAY John, *Is Interfaith Dialogue Undermining Interchurch Dialogue? Ecumenics as the Framework for an Integral Ecumenism*. In RAFFERTY Oliver SJ (ed.), *Reconciliation: Essays in Honour of Michael Hurley*. Dublin, 1993. 157–175.

10 See on this D'ARCY MAY John, *Transforming Pluralism and Dialogue*. *Doctrine and Faith* 1995/1. 533–534.

11 We are not sure how far this view is similar to Wilfred CANTWELL SMYTH's view on truth claims in religions.

12 SILLER Hermann P., *Ein Lernertrag*. In SILLER Hermann P., *Suchbewegungen, Synkretismus, Kulturelle Identität und kirchliches Bekenntnis*. Darmstadt, 1991. 193.

Therefore we can still relate our new narrative to theirs, and in the event of that communication, influence their narratives, reshape ours or even open more perspectives. The very threat of syncretism lies where people are forced from the outside to adopt another view instead of approaching it from their own point of origin.

The final limit we see lies in the question of one's own ability to withstand the permanent need to reshape and re-evaluate one's own worldviews again and again while still preserving something like an identity.

Therefore, the task of rootedness in one's own tradition or narrative is of the greatest importance. This rootedness will then develop into a basic foundation for a transformative praxis of our own lives and the world around us. It is this praxis in which the comparison and valuation of religious traditions has its most important place and from which no detachment is possible.

John George HUBER

A Lutheran – Roman Catholic Initiative in the United States Dialogues

Bilateral and multilateral conversations among Christian communions are commonplace. Scanning a recent issue of the *Centro Pro Unione Semi-Annual Bulletin* indicates that there are more than one hundred fifty ecumenical (interchurch and interconfessional) theological dialogues worldwide currently underway. These include representatives of the Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical-Lutheran, Methodist, Mennonite, Moravian, Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholic, Oriental Orthodox, Pentecostal, Calvinist-Reformed, Roman Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist churches.¹ When the early beginning date of 1965 is noted for the series of nine Lutheran – Roman Catholic dialogues in the United States, the historic significance of this ecumenical initiative becomes apparent.²

For the Roman Catholic Church, this new bilateral venture would have been almost unthinkable just three or four years earlier, prior to the convening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 by Pope JOHN XXIII.³ Ecumenical restrictions had been set by the encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, issued by Pope PIUS XI in 1928.⁴ This encyclical forbade members of the Roman Catholic Church to “take part in the assemblies of non-Catholics”, and also proposed a reunion with this church and the acceptance of papal authority as the prerequisite

1 *A Bibliography of Interchurch and Interconfessional Theological Dialogues. Fifteenth Supplement.* Centro Pro Unione Semi-Annual Bulletin 2000/57. 10–12.

2 *The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church.* 1965.

3 ABBOTT, *Important Dates of Vatican II.* 741.

4 BELL G. K. (ed.), *Documents on Christian Unity: A Selection from the First and Second Series (1920–1930).* London, 1955. 188–200.