

Must Religion be Overthrown?

Myth, Religion and Liberation in the Thought of Ernst Cassirer¹

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Is religion coming to an end? Throughout the ages man has questioned how life came about, where it is heading and what its purpose is. Will the foreseeable future provide no further answers to take us beyond empirical reality? Will the rich tradition of belief in a transcendental reality, to which man bore witness, one day perish? And will this happen although debate about god and the gods seems to be as old as human culture?²

In the second half of the 20th century sociologists argued that secularisation would lead to the end of religion. Yet present-day developments seem to be pointing in a different direction. There is talk of a revival of religion.³ But

could this not also be seen as a last stand in the face of the death of God and of belief? The following reflections should be read against a background of argument in the field of the sociology of religion. They form part of a completely different discipline, philosophy, more particularly, the philosophy of culture.

Ernst Cassirer, who may be considered as one of the founders of the modern philosophy of culture, comes back again and again to the phenomenon of religion. He does not present a philosophy of religion, nor, as Enno Rudolph has repeatedly emphasised, is it possible to read one into Cassirer's works.⁴ Cassirer teaches us to regard religion as an expression of culture.⁵ As such it is of interest to him. In this respect Cassirer's work reveals a noticeable asymmetry. He deals at length with myth, with its followers and their philosophy and particularly with the transition from myth to religion. For him the further development of religion is of fleeting interest. His comments on the future of religion are brief and ambiguous. This, however, is the core issue of this essay. In Cassirer's view is religion only one aspect, albeit an important one, of cultural development? Must it therefore one day pass or does it remain a permanent feature of culture?

I propose to examine these questions in four stages. Firstly I shall briefly recall what role Cassirer ascribes to religion in the development

¹ The essay goes back to a lecture I was invited to give by the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Social Sciences and the Swedish Ernst Cassirer Society in spring 2005 in Gothenburg. I am very grateful to Hans Joas who organized and led the symposium on «Ernst Cassirer and the Philosophy and Sociology of Religion» for inviting me and for very stimulating discussions.

² The controversial discussion about the meaning of «religion» cannot be resumed here. The introductory questions are intended only as an indication of the definition which is attempted in the following reflections. For the debate on the concept in religious studies see *Theo Sundermeier, Was ist Religion? Religionswissenschaft im theologischen Kontext*, Gütersloh 1999.

³ Cf. Hans Joas, *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz*, Freiburg 2004, especially 11–49.

⁴ Cf. Enno Rudolph, *Ernst Cassirer im Kontext*, Tübingen 2003, 71.

of human culture. Then I shall examine those sections of his work which appear to point to a necessary end to religion. The third stage will be concerned with those of Cassirer's findings which suggest that, rather than come to an end, religion may undergo a metamorphosis. Finally I should like to add a theological comment, for I write from the standpoint of a committed theologian.

Let us be clear. I cannot give a conclusive answer to the question posed in the title. I can only point to some lines in Cassirer's work and try to draw them a little further. This essay aims not to end but to stimulate discussion — discussion which should once more include the sociology of religion.

Religion as a Liberating Process

«Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation.»⁶ This is the opening sentence of the final section of the last of Cassirer's books to be published in his lifetime. It can serve to sum up the content and the aim of his total output. But it is important to interpret it correctly. Based on his study of the philosophy of history, Cassirer does not hold an optimistic view of progress nor forecast a straight run towards a liberated future

⁵ Quotations from Cassirer's works follow the English edition as far as available. Where quotations have been translated, the German original is noted. I owe a debt of gratitude to my assistant, Anja Middelbeck-Varwick, and to Alison McConell, Belfast, for rendering my text into English. The following works are of note for Cassirer's conception of religion: *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. 2, 6th edn, New Haven 1968 (cited as PSF II); *An Essay on Man*, 7th ed., New Haven 1956 (EM); «Cohen's Philosophy of Religion», in: *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 1/1996, 89–104 (CPR); *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, Hamburg 1998.

Nicholas of Cusa's concept of religion, which was of special importance for Cassirer is specifically treated in: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, edn, Darmstadt 1995 (EP 1); *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, 7th edn, Darmstadt 1994 (IK).

⁶ EM 228.

which will be both peaceful and humane. He was always very much aware of the changing course of history and human culture. The horror which lies at the root of human activity was brought home to him even more forcibly during the period of Nazi rule. In the «Myth of State»,⁷ Cassirer's penetrating analysis of fascism, his revulsion is apparent in every line. Even so, he wrote this sentence. And he wrote it after his flight from Germany and eleven years of exile, some spent in Gothenburg. What did it mean for Cassirer when he wrote «man's progressive self-liberation» and what meaning could it have had in 1944? To what kind of process does he refer?

One particular view of human kind excludes the possibility of «process». Since man first existed he has been an «animal symbolicum».⁸ He does not have to become one. Only by virtue of being an «animal symbolicum» does a living creature become a human being. Cassirer's basic anthropological thesis rests on the realisation of this proposition. Since the beginning of human existence man has shaped his world; or to put it more precisely, human activity is always cultural activity, whether man is aware of it or not.

According to this interpretation all development takes place within a cultural framework. When he writes of liberation Cassirer accords this development a particular meaning: driven by an inner necessity — which will be discussed later — man's awareness of his active role in shaping his culture grows. This consciousness is the awareness of freedom. Man becomes free in recognising that his world has been shaped by him. Here Cassirer means considerably more than the technical alteration of his natural environment.⁹ Culture as a whole is «symbolic form» (*symbolische Form*); the connection between sensory signs, the sensuous perception, and a spiritual dimension, the meaning (*sinnliche Zeichen/geistige Bedeutung*). Man is not free to choose if he will shape the world in this fashion;

⁷ *The Myth of State*, 2.print, New Haven 1946.

⁸ EM 26.

⁹ For the relationship between technique, philosophy and culture see E. Cassirer, «Form und Technik», in: *Symbol, Technik, Sprache. Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1927–1933*, ed. by E.W. Orth and John M. Krois, Hamburg 1985, 39–90.

the link between the mind and the senses is the ‹prime mover› (*Urtatsache*) of his consciousness. Yet he is free to choose *how* he will shape the world. The more clearly man realises this, the more decisively can he shape it. A good twenty years before his programmatic thesis on «Man's Liberation of the Self» in the introduction to the first volume of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer wrote: «Thus, with all their inner diversity, the various products of culture — language, scientific knowledge, myth, art, religion — become parts of a single great problem-complex: they become multiple efforts, all directed toward the one goal of transforming the passive world of mere impressions, in which the spirit seems at first imprisoned, into a world that is pure expression of the human spirit». ¹⁰

If we take the generally accepted view that the power of reason is expressed in various fields, we must conclude that it is in the realm of theoretical reason that Cassirer speaks of freedom. In it he recognises an active element. Yet even here he refuses to accept any clear distinction: man's understanding of the world and its expression in symbolic form is always an eminently practical activity. There is a reciprocal correlation between how man understands the world and how he deals with it. Perhaps this correlation was so self-evident to Cassirer that he did not take the trouble to expatiate on the fundamental principles of ethics. ¹¹ Awareness of man's freedom to understand and shape the

world implies the application of this insight to social activity. A society founded on such freedom will have to regulate its corporate life so as to ensure that it is safeguarded. Cassirer clearly believes if man is free to shape his culture, this freedom must also shape the products of that culture. Modern science, able to stamp its own character on the construction of the world, looks very different from early attempts to shape the course of the world. A painting which seeks to reproduce the world around it looks different from the sculpture in which the artist expresses his creativity. A man who is aware of his freedom will speak differently about himself and his position in the world from one who believes himself governed solely by his sensuous impressions.

Having arrived at this analysis of man's self-liberation Cassirer accords religion a decisive share in it. This share is apparent in the changes which lead from myth to religion. This is not the place to present Cassirer's extensive theory of myth. It is enough to state that Cassirer does not intend his thesis on the transition from myth to religion to be seen as a representation of a historical process or even as a breach of that process. For him myth and religion are closely linked, indeed intertwined. At the same time Cassirer's comments shed a powerful light on the development of culture in both the general field and that of the history of religion. Three steps separate a religious understanding of the world from the mythical. These are equally the three steps involved in the process of increasing self-liberation which constitute our theme.

(1) «Religion takes the decisive step that is essentially alien to myth: in its use of sensuous images and signs it recognizes them as such — a means of expression which, though they reveal a determinate meaning, must necessarily remain inadequate to it, which ‹point› to this meaning but never wholly exhaust it». ¹² I repeat: when and where this cut is performed is not significant, the important thing is that it is performed. That man is aware of his freedom is evidenced by the step he takes into actively shaping his awareness. Arguing from myth and the forms in which it is expressed Cassirer elucidates the

¹⁰ PSF I (7th edn, New Haven 1968), 80 et seq.

¹¹ Cassirer's understanding of ethics is significant for the question of religion for several reasons: firstly with regard to ethically orientated religion (cf. EM 108); then for the question whether and how religion differs from ethics, which led Hermann Cohen to revise his concept of religion in «Ethik des reinen Willens» (3rd edn, Berlin 1921) and to redefine it. (*Die Religion der Vernunft: Aus den Quellen des Judentums*, 2nd edn, pub. posthumously Darmstadt 1966). Some important publications dealing with Cassirer's ethics are: John Michael Krois, *Cassirer, Symbolic Forms and History*, New Haven 1987, 142–171; Birgit Recki, «Kultur ohne Moral? Warum Ernst Cassirer trotz der Einsicht in den Primat der praktischen Vernunft keine Ethik schreiben konnte», in: D. Frede / R. Schmücker (ed.), *Ernst Cassirer. Werk und Wirkung*, Darmstadt 1997, 58–78.

¹² PSF II, 239.

necessity of this step (see above). Understanding of the world through myth is communicated in fleeting images and their very diversity increasingly undermines their ability to portray immediately the presence of the divine. The images turn into «something outside».¹³ This «outsideness» leads us to question what is the basis of these images and to discover the power of the human spirit which shapes them.

(2) «All the higher ethical religions... relieve the intolerable burden of the taboo system; but they detect, on the other hand, a more profound sense of religious obligation that instead of being a restriction or compulsion is the expression of a new positive ideal of human freedom».¹⁴ The close connection, referred to above, between theoretical and practical reason is confirmed in the description of this step. If human freedom is defined as the power by which religious images are shaped, man's relationship with divine reality must also rest upon the degree of freedom he has attained. Responsible ethical behaviour becomes the measure against which the quality of this relationship is assessed.

(3) «For all the diversity, all the differentiation and fragmentation, of divine action ceases as soon as the mystical consciousness considers this action no longer from the standpoint of the objects to which it extends but from the standpoint of its origin. The diversity of mere action now becomes more and more clearly discernible. And to this transformation of the concept of the god corresponds a new view of man and his spiritual-ethical personality».¹⁵ Here we have reached the third step which takes us from myth to religion: the individual's realisation of his own subjectivity is perfected in what is again a reciprocal process. Recognising the gods as subject to their deeds man begins to experience himself as subject to his actions — and vice versa. This development is most clearly perfected in monotheistic religions, where it is easiest to comprehend the wholeness of the active man.¹⁶

In brief: Religion — or more precisely: prophetic religion — allows man to see himself as a subject. This subject is responsible for the images through which attention is drawn to divine reality. Further, in his freedom he is responsible for his actions. As a consequence of his actions he finds not only his place in a society based upon ethical principles but these actions also authenticate the relationship between God and man, who in his freedom stands face to face with God. A religion which opens the way to this aim contributes without doubt to humanising culture.

Liberation from Religion?

Viewed against the background of the conclusions which we have now reached, it would be possible to ascribe a particularly symbolic form to religion. In their concrete manifestations religions would have to be measured by their ability to promote thought and an awareness of freedom and, by no means least, their contribution to a humane world. In any case it is interesting to pose the question of how religions get on with one another and with other ways of interpreting the world.¹⁷ Moreover at first sight it is not easy to grasp why such a standpoint should be made a matter of dispute. Yet in Cassirer's work there are some noticeable indications. They seem to suggest that religion as a symbolic form must once more be overcome; that it must dissolve into a higher — i.e. a freer — form of awareness of man's world and his consciousness of self.

¹⁶ Cf. in detail Ernst Cassirer, *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs*, 8th edn, Darmstadt 1994, 71–158, especially 134–141.

¹⁷ That was the focus of my investigation: *Die Fraglichkeit der Offenbarung. Ernst Cassirers Philosophie als Orientierung im Dialog der Religionen*, Regensburg 2000. To me it seems justifiable to define not only religions in general as a cultural phenomenon and thus as «symbolic form» but also to call specific religions in the respective forms they assume «symbolic forms». Starting from this assumption I am searching in Cassirer's philosophy for criteria applicable to dialogue among religions (cf. 258–262). See in addition Cornelia Richter, *Die Religion in der Sprache der Kultur*, Tübingen 2004, 293 et seq.

¹³ PSF II, 282.

¹⁴ EM 108.

¹⁵ PSF II, 217f.

Firstly we must deal with a somewhat formal argument. Cassirer believes that he can detect a pattern in man's cultural development and in the process of his growing self-liberation.¹⁸ According to his interpretation the increasing awareness of the active role which man enjoys while learning to understand and shape the world goes through three stages: in the beginning the world is experienced as a reality which man attempts to imitate (*Nachahmung*). At this point man sees his thoughts and activities determined by the circumstances of his daily life. From this entire passiveness already representative acting (*Darstellung*) differs. Man is aware of the fact that he is the creator — that he forms an image of the world by trying to locate the events of his day-to-day living each within its own perspective. The third level is reached when man recognises that symbolic expression equates to the functional. Cassirer refers here to 'pure meaning' (*reine Bedeutung*) which has its origin in a human interpretation. In distinguishing these three levels Cassirer expressly refers to Goethe's theory of art¹⁹ which holds that the artist achieves complete freedom — 'style' (*Stil*) — when art is accepted as an expression of human activity. But a problem arises when we seek to apply this schema to Cassirer's analysis of myth and religion. The step from myth to religion can be regarded as the transition from imitation to creation. The third step would then have to be omitted. Must it — in accordance with the dynamic

¹⁸ The dynamics presented here, which according to Cassirer pass through three stages, figure consistently in his extensive work and have never been substantially modified. My description follows mainly two works of Cassirer: The essay «Das Symbolproblem und seine Darstellung im System der Philosophie», in *Symbol, Technik, Sprache* (see note 9), 1–21 and the passage about art in EM 137–170. For the problem of formalisation of cultural development see Oswald Schwemmer, *Ernst Cassirer. Ein Philosoph der europäischen Moderne*, Berlin 1977, 65 et seq.

¹⁹ Cf. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, «Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier, Stil», in: J. W. v. Goethe, *Schriften zur Kunst I.* = dtv Gesamtausgabe, vol. 33, München 1962, 32–38. Cassirer directly refers to this: E. Cassirer, *Wesen und Wirkung* (note 16), 182 et seq. The later works also make reference to Goethe.

of human culture — still have to be taken? And what would it lead to? To a new form of religion? Or to the overthrow, the end, of religion?²⁰

One of Cassirer's statements seems to point unambiguously towards an end to religion: «from the first magical view religion strives toward a progressively purer spiritualization. And yet, again and again, it is carried back to a point at which the question of its truth and meaning content shifts into the question of the reality of its objects, at which it faces the problem of «existence» in all its harshness. It is only the aesthetic consciousness that leaves this problem truly behind it.»²¹

The last sentence in particular seems to shed doubt on whether religion, being of equal status with other symbolic forms of expression, could accomplish the step from the second to the third level of symbolic representation. In Cassirer's view religion is clearly tied in with a problem which, if eliminated, demands also the elimination of religion. Such an elimination would be a minimum requirement if the problem were to prevent further progress on man's route to self-liberation. What exactly does this problem consist of? To what extent can the «problem of existence» prevent man's freedom? Here and there throughout Cassirer's work there are various indications which reveal different aspects of the «problem of existence».

a) *The problem of the conflict between form and content*

This problem arises in the field of conflict between art and religion which has been detailed here. According to Cassirer art has a share in developing the shaping of symbolic form into an

²⁰ Markus Tomberg, *Der Begriff von Mythos und Wissenschaft bei Ernst Cassirer und Kurt Hübner*, Münster 1996, 179–186, and Cornelia Richter, «Symbol, Mythos, Religion. Zum Status der Religion in der Philosophie Ernst Cassirers», in D. Korsch, E. Rudolph (ed.), *Die Prägnanz der Religion in der Kultur, Ernst Cassirer und die Theologie*, Tübingen 2000, 5–32, especially 7–17, all discuss how difficult it is, to apply the three-step-schema to Cassirer's understanding of myth and religion.

²¹ PSF II, 261.

ever clearer awareness of how that form is shaped. Art has perfected this process of development when the artist gives up copying or even simply shaping a received sense impression. His aim must rather be «a pure expression of its own creative power».²² In this artistic expression there is no longer any «outside» against which he must be measured or from which he could be isolated.²³ This doesn't apply in the mythical and also in the religious world view, Cassirer believes. The religious world of image and symbol has its essential limits. It must submit to playing a secondary role to the divine reality which gives it purpose and which it is there to serve.

b) *The Impossibility of Abolishing Images*

Religion cannot escape this problem by entirely renouncing images and symbols. Nor is a complete abandonment of symbols possible in any understanding of the world — for creation and understanding are perfected in the symbolic process. Yet more is demanded of the signs and symbols of religion than of the laws of nature. They must not only serve to interpret divine reality; in the eye of the believer they are man-made images through which and in which divine reality is revealed. In this necessity Cassirer sees the reason why religion remains tied to myth while in other aspects it has cast it off.²⁴

c) *The Problem of Heteronomy*

Cassirer gives another slant to the problem in an essay where he takes issue with Hermann Cohen's philosophy of religion. Like Cohen he asks if accepting the existence of God does not

basically contradict accepting man's freedom and his autonomy.²⁵ The heteronomy can assume quite different forms: it can require man to believe in, or at least to be persuaded to believe in, the content of a received revelation running counter to his own rational thinking; it can see human freedom so restrained that only through an act of divine forgiveness can that freedom be restored, (such views are current not only in the collective Christian tradition²⁶ but also in Kant and Cohen²⁷); and finally monotheist traditions at least recognise that God himself has played an active role in history. Yet through God's action man's freedom of action seems limited if not entirely eliminated.²⁸ If we consider these facets of the problem of existence it seems worth posing the question, already all but answered: must man be set free of religion given that religion has contributed so much to self-liberation? Yes. It removes man's freedom of action and of shaping his world.

²⁵ Cf. Rudolph, *Cassirer* (note 4), 89–91.

²⁶ The soteriological statements of the New Testament are fundamental here, especially the statements in the Epistle of Paul to the Romans set the standard for further discussion. See Thomas Pröpper, *Evangelium und freie Vernunft. Konturen einer theologischen Hermeneutik*, Freiburg 2001, 103–128.

²⁷ The thought that human freedom having fallen into sin needs a divine redemption can be found in Kant's work *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (B 54, A 50). Cf. Helmut Hoping, *Freiheit im Widerspruch. Eine Untersuchung zur Erbsündenlehre im Ausgang von Immanuel Kant*, Innsbruck 1990. For Cohen the problem of sin is a substantial reason for his already above (note 11) mentioned change of his philosophy of religion. See Cohen, *Religion*, 218–220; besides Richard Schaeffler, «Die Vernunft und das Wort. Zum Religionsverständnis bei Hermann Cohen und Franz Rosenzweig», in: *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 78 (1981), 57–89. It would be worth investigating to what extent Cohen's concept of redemption can be harmonised with Cassirer's view that Cohen had proposed an «immanent religion».

²⁸ Cf. Kurt Flasch's stricture of Augustine: Kurt Flasch, *Logik des Schreckens*, Mainz 1990, 19–138. His criticism is neither incidental nor marginal. For centuries Augustine's theology informed the idea that an irreconcilable contradiction existed between God's actions and man's freedom.

²² *Ibd.*

²³ Cf. *Wesen und Wirkung* (note 16), 157; EM 168–170.

²⁴ «If we attempt to isolate and remove the basic mythical components from religious belief, we no longer have religion in its real, objectively historical manifestation; all that remains is a shadow of it, an empty abstraction.» (PSF II, 239). Enno Rudolph, *Cassirer* (note 4), 80.87, therefore speaks of a «Verlust» (loss), that religion sustains by separating from myth.

Immanence as Freedom

Close as the need for liberation from religion may now lie, one further query must be addressed. It has not been made sufficiently clear how, from the viewpoint of religion, it is possible to speak of the <reality> and the <existence> of its object. Let us turn to Cassirer's interpretation of reality and truth.

a) *Reality and Existence*

The great merit of Cassirer's theory of symbols is that it is based on the union of meaning and sensibility (*Sinn und Sinnlichkeit*) which comes to us through our consciousness. Cassirer understands the distinction between <perception> and <interpretation> not in the sense of a basic dualism which — as a rule in vain — seeks a synthesis of both these aspects. For him the distinction is a secondary one arising from an analysis of the above-mentioned union in our consciousness. This distinction however never loses sight of the original union.²⁹

Accordingly, for Cassirer symbolic forms are not workings of an exterior world perceived through the senses but the route whereby reality can be attained. For man symbols constitute reality. There is no other. «True, we still remain in a world of images but these are not images which reproduce a self-subsistent world of <things>; they are image-worlds whose principle and origin are to be sought in an autonomous creation of the spirit. Through them alone we see what we call <reality> and in them alone we possess it: for the highest objective truth that is accessible to the spirit is ultimately the form of its own activity.»³⁰

This reality comes about in diverse ways. Cassirer cites two fundamentally different forms.³¹ Some seek to establish laws to allow

them to place the objects which they have perceived empirically into a connection and to influence them. To this group belong science and technology. The concepts used to describe and regulate these objects are purely functional and bear no substantial relationship to what they describe.

Yet the teaching of science is not enough to satisfy man's construction of reality; over and above all this, he seeks to make sense of everything which he encounters or creates and in the process makes use of a great variety of symbols. They serve a double function: on the one hand they allow man to ascribe a sensual awareness into a horizon of sense; on the other, this horizon is represented in the sensuous signs. The process of allocating a meaning in this way — whether it is ethical, artistic, legal or historical — turns it into an object of cultural sciences. From its form and outcome man seeks enlightenment. «The constancy that we require for this is not that of properties or laws but rather that of significations».³²

Obviously this differentiation of Cassirer's can be applied to a higher unity. For science itself is a product of human culture. It is one form, admittedly a very specific form, in which a meaning is attached to the objects of study and as such they would also be of interest to cultural science. Yet the distinction struck between cultural and scientific objects is, on closer reflection, helpful with clarifying <the problem of existence>. It can be shown that even the concept of reality is open to different interpretations. The notion of existence is meaningful only in relation to objects capable of sensuous perception. Here we are speaking of what can be experienced, scientifically measured and technically manipulated. Yet human reality far exceeds this view of existence: there is little point in depriving the wide range of meanings of their reality — starting from the conventional view of morality expressed in works of art and extending to the great thinking evident throughout the history of spiritual and religious teaching. Cassirer therefore proposes a distinction between the two

²⁹ Cf. Cassirer, *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, Hamburg 1995, 14. Cf. Bongardt, *Fraglichkeit* (note 17), 128–135.; Enno Rudolph, «Die sprachliche Kohärenz des symbolischen Universums. Der Weg zur ungeschriebenen Religionsphilosophie Ernst Cassirers», in Korsch, *Prägnanz* (note 20), 76–90, here: 78–81.

³⁰ PSFI, 111.

³¹ Cf. Cassirer, *The Logic of Cultural Sciences*, New Haven 2000.

³² Cassirer, *Logic* (note 31), 75.

concepts «existence» and «reality» which takes into account the much greater extent of the latter. «This philosophy does not raise the question and does not try to answer the question of the existence of God, it inquires exclusively into the meaning of the idea of God. [...] There is therefore no real difference between what we call the reality of God and what we call the reality of a moral order of the universe, the validity of our ethical ideals.»³³

This has far-reaching consequences. Whilst reality is understood as symbolically shaped by man, no limits may be set to the question of what is truth. It is its inner consistency and its power to enlighten, and not any similarity to that part of it which can be perceived empirically, which determine the validity of a particular form of reality. Cassirer therefore believes that «we must conceive of the problem of recognition and the problem of truth as particular instances of the general problem of meaning».³⁴

What does this mean for religion? Religions open to their adherents an individual view of the world. They pose and answer questions about the whence and whither of reality. They lay down horizons within which man can understand his life and his world. Thereby the questions, which man expects religion to answer, change. In the past it may well have been that these were primarily questions about eternal salvation, about morality and even about the existence of God. In today's western world these questions have taken on a new focus. Religion is being explored as a possible source of meaning in a reality which appears for far too many to be meaningless.³⁵ This confirms what is in any case obvious: religion is not in competition with science but is to be explored for the form and content of its interpretation of meaning.³⁶

There is one further point: all questions and answers contained within religion stem from man's deliberations, his ability to express himself and to persuade others. In all their «signs and images», in all their forms of expression, religions are a cultural phenomenon. They are part of the form in which man shapes his reality.³⁷ And for believers reality is dictated by the world as their religion sees it. They build on the assumption that this reality is dependable, that it can offer guidance and truth. And in the sense of this definition of reality there is no reason, from a philosophical perspective, to deny the reality claimed in this particular sense by religion.

This brings us to the point where the question of the continuing existence of religion arose. How does religion tackle «the problem of existence»? Where does the religious meaning get its authority? From something formed by man or from the work of a transcendental reality? Does the meaning on which religion hinges stand and fall with a transcendental existence?

Certainly most believers — at least in the monotheistic traditions — will insist that their faith is meaningful only if God «exists», that the «existence» of God is a necessary prerequisite for their faith's claim to truth. Yet at this point it is worth asking — along with Cassirer and Cohen — does religion not also fulfil its human function without posing the question of existence? And above all, what does the «existence» of God mean? Believers will refuse that God can be identified as one empirical object among others whose existence can be proved sensuously and experimentally. The reality of God must be of a different nature. But which one?

This is not the place to present the abundance of attempted responses which have been offered within the philosophical and theological traditions. I am limiting myself to that one line which Cassirer himself mentions from time to time —

³³ CPR 99 et seq.

³⁴ Wir müssen «das Erkenntnisproblem und das Wahrheitsproblem als Sonderfälle des allgemeinen Bedeutungsproblems begreifen» (Cassirer, «Erkenntnistheorie nebst den Grenzfragen der Logik und Denkpsychologie», in: ders., *Erkenntnis, Begriff, Kultur*, hg. v. R. Bast, Hamburg 1993, 77–144, hier 81).

³⁵ Cf. Joas, *Mensch* (note 3), 20–31.

³⁶ Christian Danz, «Der Begriff des Symbols bei Paul Tillich und Ernst Cassirer», in Korsch, *Prägnanz* (note 20), 201–228, here: 226–228.

³⁷ Dietrich Korsch, «Religion und Kultur bei Hermann Cohen und Ernst Cassirer», in Korsch, *Prägnanz* (note 20), 162–178, here: 173–178. Michael Moxter, *Kultur als Lebenswelt*, Tübingen 2000.

whether because it is a particular favourite with him I cannot judge.

He speaks in the essay about Cohen which I have already mentioned of an «immanent religion». He sees the models for it explicitly in Schleiermacher,³⁸ implicitly in Cusanus. An «immanent religion» would be one which does not owe its concrete form solely to being shaped by man — that is true for every religion seen from a cultural or philosophical perspective. An «immanent religion» is conscious of its «immanent» character. In a certain sense it would be based upon reality taken as a whole. «According to Schleiermacher religion consists in taking all particulars as part of the whole, everything limited as a representation of the infinite.»³⁹ Cassirer believes that Schleiermacher does not do justice to the notion of a strictly «immanent religion». In his dogma he introduces the «the feeling of a profound dependence (*Gefühl der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit*)» as lying at the heart of religious devotion and an indication that man is a religious animal. On the other hand according to both Cassirer and Cohen a strictly «immanent religion» would have to be persuaded that «the spontaneity, the self-activity, the autonomy of reason, may be regarded as a source and foundation of religious truth.»⁴⁰

However, to be fair to the religious traditions of monotheism, this approach to religion must be read alongside a significant new definition of metaphysics. The contrast — in the Cusanus tradition — between transcendence and immanence would have to be excluded.⁴¹ Otherwise the afore-mentioned problem of an independent point of reference to an image and of a divine heteronomy limiting human autonomy would persist. Using image as a metaphor, a notion

which Cusanus borrowed from Plato, seems to Cassirer to have been very plausible.⁴² Its underlying principle is that God, as transcendent, ever-lasting reality, creates the world as his definitive image. Yet the honorary title of the «*imago dei*» is applicable to man alone for he alone is endowed with a spirit. His spirit is itself creative. And in his creative power he initiates the notion of the eternal God. This notion it is that gives God reality in the world of man. Being fully autonomous he yet comprehends the world as God's world — and his freedom as the gift of God through which God is realised.⁴³ «In order to attain the eternal we need only look around us in our temporal world; the creature is nothing but the self-portrayal and the self-revelation of the creator. [...] Eternity is now no longer a barrier, but the self-affirmation of reason.»⁴⁴ Cassirer sums up Cusanus' «immanent religion» in these lines. Thus in his essay on Cohen he can write: «the idea of God possesses reality: that means nothing else than that this demand is not a mere wish or illusion by which the human mind deceives itself, but that it is effective in the world of man, in the world of human history». This belief as «immanent metaphysics» is to be found in Cusanus. Cohen expounds on Cusanus' statement in an ethical perspective: «To believe in humanity, in its highest and most perfect ethical sense, and to believe in God means one and the same. [...] The idea of God coincides with the idea of humanity.»⁴⁵

⁴² The most direct reference point for this understanding of an immanent religion linked to the revelation of the image of God should be Cusanus' writing on the mind (*Idiota de mente*). It is no accident that Cassirer includes it with his translation of the text to his work on Cusanus (IK 204–297). A precise summary of Cassirer's interpretation of Cusanus' view of the relationship between transcendence and immanence can be found in EP 22–31.

⁴³ Cf. Cusanus, *Idiota de mente*, cap. 3, nr.72.

⁴⁴ «Um ins Unendliche zu schreiten, brauchen wir nur im Endlichen nach allen Seiten zu gehen: das Geschöpf ist nichts anderes als die Selbstdarstellung und Selbstoffenbarung des Schöpfers. [...] Jetzt ist die Unendlichkeit nicht mehr die Schranke, sondern die Selbstbejahung der Vernunft» (EP I, 24.27).

⁴⁵ CPR 100 et seq.

³⁸ For the relationship between Cassirer and Schleiermacher see Cornelia Richter's in-depth analysis (note 17).

³⁹ PSF II, 259.

⁴⁰ CPR 94; Rudolph, *Cassirer* (note 4), 88.

⁴¹ Cf. Rudolph, *Cassirer* (note 4), 82–88. The idea of abolishing this contradiction is contained in Cusanus' conception of God. If God is thought of as the «*coincidentia oppositorum*», then immanence and transcendence in him also find to their unity. See Kurt Flasch, *Nikolaus von Kues. Geschichte einer Entwicklung*, Frankfurt 1998, 46–70.

You will long since have noticed if we follow this train of thought we find ourselves again between Hegel and Feuerbach. True I consider it mistaken to juxtapose Cassirer's concept of <spirit> (*Geist*) too closely to Hegel's idealistic concept. Cassirer's concept is a purely functional notion, which is meant, without making any metaphysical or ontological claim, to give a name to the power which shapes it and which is a prerequisite for all such creation.⁴⁶ To this extent the concept of spirit is here — and presumably also in Cohen's work — slanted towards the philosophy of culture. But that in no way alters the fact that these considerations lead between Hegel's Scylla and Feuerbach's Charybdis. If God achieves reality by having man speak of him the question arises: Is it God who thinks in the mind of man?⁴⁷ Or is it man, who confronts to himself his own being in the form of the thought God expresses through religion?⁴⁸ An answer to this question lies outside the scope of philosophy. Kant's assertion that neither the existence nor the non-existence of God can be proved holds true. Christian tradition would always insist on distinguishing clearly between God and man in spite of our knowing that God becomes real to man only through man's speech and learning. Man believes in the reality of God as creator to whom he owes everything in the first place — and that includes his ability to bear witness to God.

However the question of the ontological status of the reality of God over and above the witness borne by man does not have to be answered here.⁴⁹ From the start we have been interested in a different question: for the sake of his freedom does man have to be liberated from religion? If the hypothesis of an «immanent religion», as Cassirer seems to accept, is followed through, this question can comfortably be answered in the

negative. For such a religion would not have to sacrifice man's autonomy to an omnipotent, spiritual God. It would be capable of forming its own images through which the reality of God is made manifest to man. Thereby, simply to fulfil its duty to man, it would be required — like the artist — again and again to test the validity of its images and their power to communicate. Given this interpretation of religion the question of the existence of God becomes the question of the meaningfulness of God for reality.

Thoughts on God and Human Freedom

In conclusion may I be permitted a brief look at these reflections from the perspective of Christian tradition and theology. Indeed they were always in Cassirer's mind when he spoke of «religion». Can Christianity regard itself as «immanent religion»?

At first sight Christians are tempted to dismiss the idea. The continuing distinction between God and the world; the covenant God established with man although he is «the great other»; the belief in a God who intervenes in history bringing salvation and who in the end brings history to a conclusion; the conviction that without God's grace man can accomplish nothing; all these are indisputable and lie at the core of Christian belief. Are they not diametrically opposed to an «immanent religion»?

There are theories proposed within Christian theology which disprove this doubt. This is not the place to present them at length. Just this much: a theology which sees divine grace and human freedom in competition with one another will always have to limit man's freedom so as to do justice to God. Yet to think in terms of competition is not a logical necessity.⁵⁰ Quite the contrary; the view that God's grace is made

⁴⁶ In this regard, Cassirer's early work *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, 7th edn, Darmstadt 1994, is definitive for his entire thought. For a closer consideration of the term «Geist» see Bongardt, *Fraglichkeit* (note 16), 143–151.

⁴⁷ Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophie der Religionen* II (=Werke 17), Frankfurt 1986, 187.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (= Werke 7), Leipzig 1883, 49.

⁴⁹ Cassirer insists that philosophy can't and doesn't have to achieve this. Cf. CPR 99 et seq. In a rare moment of agreement Wilhelm Gräß stresses that theology too may disregard this question: Wilhelm Gräß, «Religion in vielen Sinnbildern. Aspekte einer Kulturhermeneutik im Anschluß an Ernst Cassirer», in: Korsch: *Prägnanz* (note 20), 229–248, here: 248.

manifest in that he leaves man free, fits much more closely to belief in a God who loves the world and mankind unconditionally. This freedom given to man is so unconditional that man can choose what place God may occupy in the world of man; so unconditional that it decides how God become real in the world of man.⁵¹

To this extent God is dependent on man. But man owes his existence to God. In mutual recog-

inition of their freedom God and man find their fulfilment.⁵² Such dependence however is not the limit but the greatness of their freedom. Without any regard to religion this also holds true between men. To be willing to overthrow this dependence in the name of freedom is to confuse freedom with a solipsism that has nothing to do with mankind. And to it religious traditions, which also bring with them many and varied aspects of culture, should not fall victim.

⁵⁰ Cf. Gisbert Greshake, *Geschenkte Freiheit. Einführung in die Gnadenlehre*, Freiburg 1992, 106–122; Karl-Heinz Menke, *Das Kriterium des Christseins. Grundriss der Gnadenlehre*, Regensburg 2003, 170–197; Thomas Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube und Freiheitsgeschichte. Eine Skizze zur Soteriologie*, 2. Aufl., München 1988, 277–282.

⁵¹ Cf. Thomas Pröpper, *Evangelium* (note 26), 245–265; Michael Bongardt, *Fraglichkeit* (note 16), 159–164.

⁵² The fundamental thesis of Thomas Pröpper's theology which is linked with philosophy of freedom. Cf. Pröpper, *Erlösungsglaube* (note 50), 182–194.



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