

# Religion, Culture and God's Here and Now

## Contextual Theology in Dialogue with Social Anthropology

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### The Here and Now of Theology

Since the beginning, theology's long history of interpreting God has been characterised by processes of exchange with different rational, aesthetic and moral patterns in their respective contexts. The triune God has been experienced, reflected and interpreted as the God of the Here and Now.<sup>1</sup> Hence, reflecting upon «the Here and Now» represents a crucial dimension of theology.

One of contextual theology's main characteristics is the explicit use of the understanding of «culture», a field mainly developed by the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

In this article I shall not develop general observations on the future of contextual theology, but offer a piece of «craft» that I regard as necessary for the future of contextual theology as well as of systematic theology in general. The task can be summarized in one question: What is the significance of social anthropology for the understanding of religion and culture in contextual theology?

In order to deal with this task within the parameters of an article, I shall focus on one of

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mary C. Grey for coining the formulation of the «God of the Here and Now» while we were discussing an adequate title for the book on «God in Context».

anthropology's still most profiled and important theoreticians, Clifford Geertz, and on his concept of a pragmatics of religion.

Approaching anthropology as a theologian often provokes an elementary objection. Critically, colleagues are questioning why one would wish to hand oneself over to the power of Cultural Studies and thus run the risk of subordinating theology to other concerns. Should one not instead take care of the identity of theology in harmony with its own tradition?

Questions such as this are analysed and answered in a convincing way by North American theologians, e.g. Sheila Greeve Davaney and Kathryn Tanner, and I shall not spend time reproducing their arguments here.<sup>2</sup>

In short, a theology that does not meet the challenge from Cultural Studies, and that is not able to exchange theories and methods, will isolate itself. I am also afraid that it does not do justice either to its ecclesial mandate, because being-the-church always takes place in terms of

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Greeve Davaney, «Theology and the Turn to Cultural Analysis», 5, in: Delwin Brown/Sheila Greeve Davaney/Kathryn Tanner (eds.), *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001, 3–16. On different understandings of culture in theology cf. also Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress 1997.

the church's being-in-the-world. A theology that wants to reflect on the experiences of human people with the God who acts and liberates in the world, should not have problems evolving as contextual theology, as a culturally enlightened theology nurtured by the believers' synergies with the indwelling Holy Spirit of the Here and Now. Necessarily it must prepare to free itself from conventional understandings of its identity as a closed unit. Any claim to an essential autonomy of theology itself needs to be radically questioned. It seems to be more in accordance with modernity than with the classical development of theology.

In the following, I shall first describe Geertz' understanding of culture and religion. In a second move I shall discuss what contextual theology could learn from his pragmatics of religion. In a third move I shall formulate four objections to Geertz' understanding of religion in order to profile the contribution of theology to the discourse on religion and culture more clearly. Finally, I shall briefly suggest an alternative direction for a future theology by envisaging its dialogue with anthropology.

## Culture and Religion as Systems of Symbolic Representation according to Clifford Geertz

In what follows I shall not offer any detailed exegesis of Geertz' work, but concentrate on his essay about religion.

For Geertz religion is «a cultural system». «Culture» means for him

a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.<sup>3</sup>

Geertz' definition of «religion» is multifaceted and detailed. A religion is:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4)

clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>4</sup>

The elements of this definition of religion form part of the system of symbolic representations on which Geertz' whole theory of culture is founded. Through this, the anthropologist accords a specific significance to religion in itself.

Religion so far is for Geertz not fiction but a sociocultural form of expression that produces a claim to reality, a claim which he takes very seriously. Geertz' understanding of religion does not limit itself to the empirically perceivable evidence, rather he also acknowledges how religion manages to transform human experiences with regard to a superior power.<sup>5</sup>

Geertz puts a specific emphasis on religion's capacity to contribute to and to create the social order, thus arguing against any vulgar positiv-

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, «Religion as a Cultural System», in: *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books 1973, 87–125, 89. Anthropologists after Geertz have criticized the understanding of culture as a consistent, sharply bounded, stable social order and offered a more self-critical postmodern understanding of the differences in and between cultures in order not to legitimate applied ethnocentrism. Cf. Tanner, op.cit., chapter 3. Nonetheless, the strong and weak parts in Geertz' concept of culture can offer theology an entrance to the dialogue with Cultural Studies. A theological discussion with concepts of culture where, plurality, difference, multiple identities and flows are at the centre is offered in my essays on transculturality: S. Bergmann, «Transculturality and Tradition — Renewing the Continuous in Late Modernity», in: *Studia Theologica* Vol. 58, No. 2/2004, 140–156, and «Revisiting Pneumatology in Transcultural Spaces», (forthcoming in: Sturla Stålsett (ed.), *Spirits of Globalisation: Cross-Cultural and Theological Perspectives on (Neo-)Pentecostalism and Experiential Spiritualities*). Detailed descriptions and discussions with cross-cultural concepts of visual arts in anthropology are offered in S. Bergmann, *I begynnelsen är bilden: En befriande bild-konst-kultur-teologi, [In the Beginning Is the Image: A Liberating Theology of Visual Arts and Culture]*, Stockholm: Proprius 2003, chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> Geertz, 90f.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz, 109.

istic view according to which religion only offers a mirror of society.<sup>6</sup> Religion is a source for individuals and groups from which the images of the world, of the self and of the relations between both emerge, and in view of this fact religion ought to be of great interest for anthropology and the Social Sciences. At the end of his essay, the reader gains the impression that Geertz holds that the interpretation of religion is a necessary task of the Social Sciences, if they wish to understand the social and psychological life of humans in general. The theory of religion in this way fulfils the turn to pragmatics and leaves a purely idealistic or purely materialistic understanding behind.<sup>7</sup> Religion emerges in the space in between ideas and actions. Religion takes place in the synthesis of a population's worldview and ethos.

Such an understanding of religion is able to go beyond Schleiermacher's reduction of religion to «das schlechthinnige Abhängigkeitsgefühl», which had described religion by emphasising the individualistic dimension of religiosity. Since then, our discourses have been heavily influenced by the belief that religion mainly concerns the inner affairs of the individual — truly a distorting image of the human in modernity's theory of religion. Many good reasons, which will not be developed here, could be formulated against this reduction of religion to subjectivity. I would even go further and propose a human ecological model of religion where religion and religiosity are located in the triangle of subjective, sociocultural and natural dimensions with all aspects interacting in differentiated ways.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, with the help of his model Geertz manages to question not only the reductionist understandings of religion in hermeneutical

theology but also in the history of sociology — especially by stressing the constructive potential in religion which directs even the empirical social scientist toward the world of religious images and models of religious thinking and acting.

In other texts, Geertz has further developed his method of cultural analysis through combining hermeneutics and semiotics. Assisted by the turn to religious pragmatics, this method could in the future also be applied to the «reading» of cultural systems of signs and symbols and investigating them with the help of notions such as worldview, ethos, and life-interpretation.

## What Contextual Theology Could Learn from a Pragmatics of Religion

What can contextual theology learn in dialogue with Geertz' pragmatics of religion?

By contextual theology, I mean a Christian life-interpretation (Swedish «livstolkning») that is conscious about its embeddings and interchanges with historical, sociocultural and ecological contexts.<sup>9</sup>

To begin with, it seems obvious to me that systematic theology in the academic and pastoral spheres must both approach the notion of religion and relate to various theories of religion. Drawing a separating border between Christianity on the one side and religion on the other seems meaningless today.

Four reasons can be given.

Firstly, in ordinary language the terms religious, religion, religiosity and spirituality are used often and with many different meanings. Secondly, cultural and religious pluralism, promoted by the migration flows in the globalised world system, challenges Christians at nearly all places and cities of the world to reflect about

<sup>6</sup> Geertz, 119.

<sup>7</sup> «Pragmatics» means the interest in how a theory, concept or religion works in practice and its consequences for action. Similarly to linguistics Religious Studies has also turned its interest from the essence of language and religion to its use.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. my human-ecological model for contextual theology, in S. Bergmann, *God in Context: A Survey of Contextual Theology*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2003, 95–106.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *God in Context*, op.cit., 2–6. On the concept of life-interpretation (Swedish: livstolkning), which differs from the Uppsala approach of empirical studies of faith and ideologies (Swedish: livsåskådningsvetenskap) see Per Erik Persson, «Livstolkning — något för teologi/religionsvetenskap?» in: *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift* 75, No. 2, 1999, 64–70.

interreligious encounters and the intercultural sharing of life.

Thirdly, since Bonhoeffer, theology needs to face the question of how it makes sense to develop the church's being-in-the-world not only exclusively in a confessional language system, but also in how it can be meaningfully developed with regard to and as a part of other systems.

Fourthly, theology also includes the investigation of the plausibility of Christian faith in the perspective of a sociology of knowledge — which Per Frostin was strongly busy developing in a political key, while Manfred Hofmann looked more directly into the political relevance of Christian practices as parts of the social movements and especially the indigenous mobilisation.<sup>10</sup> How can the Christian interpretations of life in the horizon of the image of God become socially relevant and how could they join other religions to evolve the diversity and «multitude» of culture and nature beyond the present state of a global faith in an «Empire» of accumulating finance capital all over?<sup>11</sup>

The challenges of interreligious encounters in practices and ideologies are especially explosive in the context of the ecological challenge of globalisation, a theme that I unfortunately cannot continue in this essay.<sup>12</sup>

What, now, is the challenge of a pragmatics of religion to systematic theology?

Conventionally, one has defined theology as «Church dogmatic» or as «doctrine of faith», whose task it was to formulate and interpret the central claims of Christian faith and to connect them into a system of different «loci».

<sup>10</sup> See Per Frostin, «Kristendomens kairós», i: S. Bergmann (ed.), *De nedtystades Gud: diakoni för livets skull*, Stockholm: Proprius 1992, 13–53, 29. Manfred Hofmann/Christina Runquist, *Krock eller dialog? Europeiska möten med Latinamerikas ursprungsfolk*, Stockholm/Stehag: Symposion 2003, 220f.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Michael Hardt/Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press 2000, and Ulrich Duchrow/Franz Josef Hinkelammert, *Leben ist mehr als Kapital: Alternativen zur globalen Diktatur des Eigentums*, Oberursel: Publik-Forum 2002, (English ed. *Property for People, not for Profit: Alternatives to the global tyranny of capital*, Geneva/London: WCC and the Catholic Institute for International Relations).

In its influential form as a kerygmatic theology the task of academic theology was to serve the preaching of the Word of God. The question how God acted in this world was simply answered by claiming God's presence in the church of the believers and in creation in general. Even if it were possible to contextualise Karl Barth's theology, this does not mean that it will develop into a genuine contextual theology. Barth's understanding of theology remains, in spite of all its openness to creation, an ecclesio-centric construction, and it remains — in spite of all its Trinitarian formulations — a christo-centric and in soteriology a modalistic project.

Departing from Bonhoeffer instead, one should seek God and the church in the world, and one should always in the first place ask for the place where Christ is present, in order to ask in the second place where the church emerges. The quest for an «ecclesiogenesis» (L. Boff) needs to be given priority in a concept of creation instead of an ecclesio-centric Christology.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cf. my essay «Space and Justice in Eco-Spirituality», in: Vasilios N. Makrides/Jörg Rüpke (eds.), *Religionen im Konflikt: Vom Bürgerkrieg über Ökogewalt bis zur Gewalterinnerung im Ritual*, Münster: Aschendorff 2004, 212–225. Rich results from our Norwegian research programme on «Religion in a Globalised Age» are published at present, see <http://www.tf.uio.no/riga/eng-ab.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Volf's detailed analysis of powerful and dominant ecclesiologies in contemporary Roman-Catholic and Orthodox Church leaders as Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) and John D. Zizioulas (now Metropolitan of Pergamon). Volf's conclusion is clearly that the ecclesio-centric and power-oriented character of these two influential church leaders is obviously not in accordance with classical Christian doctrine, where the concept of God must be superior to the concept of the church, and that ecumenical ecclesiology still is a common vision to come. Miroslav Volf, *Trinität und Gemeinschaft: Eine ökumenische Ekklesiologie*, Mainz/Neukirchen Vlyun: Grünewald/Neukirchener 1996, (*After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Sacra Doctrina), Grand Rapids, MN: Eerdmans 1998). On the superiority of pneumatology and cosmology over ecclesiology in Early Church Doctrine see S. Bergmann, *Creation Set Free: The Spirit as Liberator of Nature*, chapter V.4.3., (Sacra Doctrina), Grand Rapids, MN: Eerdmans 2005.

Following Gustaf Aulén, the church represents not a value in itself but is nothing else than God's instrument to expand his reign in the whole of creation. Therefore two central questions are at the heart of ecclesiology as well: What is needed in the Here and Now of the world for the salvation of the creation, and who is the God, who acts in this context of the transformation of the world?

A catholic understanding of theology ascribes tradition a greater significance than in Protestantism, and David Tracy's influential definition states that theology is «the attempt to establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation».<sup>14</sup>

Tracy has proposed this definition in continuity with Paul Tillich and it has been widely accepted. Positively, one can say that the interpretation of the situation is given an important significance in this understanding of the work of the theologian. Tradition appears necessarily in dialogue with the interpretation of the situation.

In understanding the situation of the tradition, a pragmatics of religion could also develop interesting contributions. While «situation» for Tracy always means something in flow, he regards «tradition» as something static.

Tracy wanted to unite the static and the fluid in a common system, and one could notice clearly how he is influenced by Tillich's theory of correlation where theology offers the answer to the questions of the situation.<sup>15</sup>

However, why is the culture or existence the question and why is God the answer? Couldn't it be the opposite? Could not God be the question and could not the culture be the answer?

In my view, many biblical texts and witnesses in the Christian tradition could be read as questions about God. Where is God? What does s/he do? Why was I born? Why do I need to suffer? How can the creation be saved from evil?

The answers might be sought in the interpretations of life, culture, human beings and nature. Without an interpretation assisted by

Cultural Studies and the ecology of creation, one could not develop any theological interpretation at all. This insight is of course not at all a new one, but one can find and verify it also among many thinkers in classical theology through the ages. Earlier theologians have also been highly aware of the conditions of their context, time and place.<sup>16</sup>

In the first place, contextual theology can learn from a pragmatics of religion to regard culture as a system of symbolic representations, which are emerging in the space between life views and practical life forms. The pragmatics of religion could serve theology in so far as they offer a method, which obviously is hard to unite with a concept of an exclusively language based dogmatic. Nonetheless, it remains an open question how far one could combine it with a hermeneutical interpretation of sacred or classical texts according to Schleiermacher and Geertz.

One could for example ask whether the development of a hermeneutical theology, which does not only use hermeneutics as a useful tool or in ad-hoc ways for its own sake, but which works as an integrated discipline among others with problems of text and interpretation, could inspire the anthropologically enlightened theology. Analogous to theology understood as hermeneutics with others, contextual theology could also develop as a specific Cultural Studies

<sup>15</sup> The Canadian Protestant theologian Douglas John Hall offers many encouraging arguments and approaches for the understanding of theology as contextualisation, but he does not step out of Tillich's separation between the questions (in the context) and the answers (in Christianity) by describing the context as the «form of faith's self-understanding» (p. 84) separating it from the «content» of faith. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 1989. A more balanced view is offered by South African theologian Albert Nolan, 11: «Because our questions are always contextual, our answers also become contextual.» Albert Nolan, «What Is Contextual Theology? A South African Perspective», in: S. Bergmann/G. Eidevall (eds.), *Upptäckter i kontexten: Teologiska föreläsningar till minne av Per Frostin*, Lund: Institutet för kontextuell teologi 1995, 10–19.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Albert Nolan's clear statement, op.cit., 12: «All theology is contextual.»

<sup>14</sup> David Tracy, «Theological Method», in: P. C. Hodgson/R. King (eds.), *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, 2. ed. Philadelphia: Fortress 1985, 35-60, 36.

among others sharing the challenge to interpret cultural processes.<sup>17</sup> Manfred Hofmann has explicitly shown in several cases from Latin America (Nicaragua, Bolivia and Guatemala), how such a model can be applied with special regard to the interwoven aspects of culture and religion in specific contexts of oppression and liberating praxis, where the «identification with the Other» offers a foundational hermeneutical lens for cultural and theological interpretation.<sup>18</sup> Per Frostin developed in continuity with Edward Schillebeeckx the notion of «contrast experience» for a similar interpretation of contextually embedded systematic approaches.<sup>19</sup>

The positions conflict when it comes to the point where one needs to perceive God him-/herself in the cultural field and to identify what one sees as the Christian God. In the perspective of contextual theology, God is encountered as a Liberator in the same cultural context that also keeps the Cultural Studies busy. The Gospel in this case is not opposed to culture, as it has become usual to postulate in the ecumenically common phrase of «Gospel and culture», but the Gospel is transformed into the good news in the midst of culture.<sup>20</sup>

With the help of a pragmatics of religion, systematic theology also can widen the area of objects, which leads to a closer cooperation with for example practical theology reflecting on «lived religion».<sup>21</sup> It is not only confessions, biblical texts and tradition's classical authors —

<sup>17</sup> Jeanron describes three types of hermeneutical theology and argues for the third one, where theology develops in an equal cooperation and exchange with other hermeneutical disciplines focusing on problems of human existence. Werner G. Jeanron, *Gudstro: Teologiska reflexioner II*, Lund: Arcus 2001, 81–95.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Manfred Hofmann, *Identifikation mit dem Anderen: Theologische Themen und ihr hermeneutischer Ort bei lateinamerikanischen Theologen der Befreiung*, Lund: Verbum/Håkan Ohlssons 1978, 152ff.; *Religion und Identität: Maya in Guatemala*, Frankfurt M./London: IKO-Verlag 2001, 3ff.

<sup>19</sup> Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation*, (Studia Theologica Lundensia 42), Lund: Lund University Press 1988, 94ff.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. my critical discussion with Bevans in: *God in Context*, 90.

where already the selection of texts necessarily needs to be controversial — that belong to the central sources for theology in the area of cognitive religion in the genre of expanded doctrinal systems. A pragmatics of religion could help to integrate everything that is expressed in the space between worldview and ethos in different cultural processes. The world of ordinary life (Alltagswelt)<sup>22</sup> would then become a central locus for theology.

A beautiful example is found in my essay on the culture of composting where it is made evident how the — in environmentalism nearly holy — compost can be understood as an expression of a specific late modern or better compost-modern religiosity of earth and Spirit, which can be located in the horizon of antique Greek Gaia goddess spirituality and patristic theology.<sup>23</sup>

In the context of a more aesthetically directed Religious and Christian Studies one should also include the many artefacts from visual arts and architecture, and also urban and landscape planning as important sources for the reflection on how the God of the Here and Now is acting in a spatially liberative mode.<sup>24</sup>

Geertz emphasises, as we saw, the capacity of religion not only to mirror social reality but also

<sup>21</sup> On the notion of «gelebte Religion» (lived religion) and the relationship of religion, life and interpretation see Hans-Günter Heimbrock, «Kann das Leben die Religion ersetzen? Religionstheoretische Überlegungen zur Konjunktur eines Begriffs», in: M. Witte (ed.), *Der eine Gott und die Welt der Religionen: Beiträge zur Theologie der Religionen und zum interreligiösen Dialog*, Würzburg 2003, 387–409, 407. Cf. also Wolf-Eckart Failing/Hans-Günter Heimbrock, *Gelebte Religion wahrnehmen: Lebenswelt — Alltagskultur — Religionspraxis*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1998.

<sup>22</sup> On the concept of «Alltagswelt» and man/woman's bodily being in it see Schütz, 29ff., and on contextual theology approaching the culture of ordinary life see S. Bergmann/C.R. Bråkenhielm (eds.), *Vardagskulturens teologi i nordisk tolkning*, Nora. Nya Doxa 1998. Alfred Schütz/Thomas Luckmann, *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, Konstanz: UVK 2003.

<sup>23</sup> S. Bergmann, «Erde, Kultur und Heiliger Geist: Praktische Theologie des Kompostierens», in: *Geist, der lebendig macht: Lavierungen zur ökologischen Befreiungstheologie*, Frankfurtam Main: IKO-Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation 1997, 296–328.

to shape it. The question concerning how religiously determined life interpretations are designed so that they lead to a transformation of social praxis becomes here a central problem for contextual theology with normative ambitions.

The challenges emerge in life itself, which inspire belief in God as well as life with God to new modes of thinking and acting. In Latin America it was the suffering of large parts of the population under an unjust world economy system who's violence still victimises human and other beings in many places of the planet. In feminist theology, it was the many differentiated experiences of being a woman in the context of a hierarchically ordered patriarchy with many faces. In ecotheology, one takes serious the experiences of the living creatures in our environment that are suffering under man's uncontrolled desire to rule over nature. Interpreting these experiences in a framework of a pragmatics of religion one must ask what it means that God is encountered as a liberator at those places where his/her creatures are suffering, and how this faith and experience can contribute to the transformation of social and cultural practices of globalisation.

Another application can also be studied in so-called Islamism. How are understandings of faith and interpretations of holy scriptures and traditions constructed in such a way that they become a motivation to participate in a military fight against global evil in general, which can only be destroyed because it is simply nothing but evil?

And in an opposite way: How can the so-called war against terrorism be understood as a religious expression between a Christian sectarian worldview and a nationalistic ethos where Christian and political elements are intermingling in a way that the well known claim of validity for the fight of good against evil dominates the present world politics? In addition, why is

this moral struggle not extended to industrial man's acceleration of global climate change in creation?

To put it shortly: The Islamist interpretation of Islam is as hard to combine with its own tradition as the war against evil by Reagan and Bush Jr. is compatible with the Christian tradition.<sup>25</sup> It is, though, of great interest that both Islam and Christianity can be politically interpreted in such a distorted, perverted mode. It is furthermore necessary to analyse why this interpretation mobilizes a whole range of populations and economic and military systems by such a political theology that does not relate to any idea of a common good and a common God for the best of all creatures in creation. In my view, Geertz gives serious credit to the political capacity of religion including Christianity.

One could possibly hope that Geertz' idea of the social relevance of religion could also be transferred to theology itself which unfortunately is regarded as not very plausible or relevant today. The opposite needs to be made evident. After having critically discussed for a long while the guilt of monotheism in modern and universalistic oppressions of differences and strangers, we would strongly need a discourse on the constructive and liberative potentials of a triune religiosity for a diverse and united, a planetarian and colourful world, where both the strange and the familiar, both identity and difference are reconciled.

## System, Symbol, Function, Power — Critical Objections

Geertz' theory of religion is of course not without problems either. Here, I will focus on four objections.

What does Geertz mean by «system»?

Is religion for him a system of a specific kind, which is related to other systems like science,

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Seppo Kjellberg, *Urban Ecotheology*, Utrecht: International Books 2000; T. J. Goringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002; S. Bergmann (ed.), *Architecture, Aesth/Ethics and Religion*, Frankfurt am Main/London: IKO-Verlag für interkulturelle Kommunikation 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Bush Jr. and his allies in the «war against evil» are violating a foundational principle in Christian faith, clearly formulated in the Lord's prayer: «... and save us from evil». Not the human believer him/herself but only God has the full capacity of salvation. The one who claims this power for oneself moves into heresy.

common sense or arts? Alternatively, is religion and religiosity sooner a partial system of culture in general?

Geertz does not offer a clear answer, and it would be one possibility to understand his conception of system as analogous to Luhmann where religion represents a particular system in the total social system.

Such a limited understanding could probably not be combined either with the intentions behind Geertz' essay. His emphasis was to overcome the reductionist theories in Social Science and to widen the understanding of religion in a way that makes it possible to use religion as a notion to describe and hermeneutically interpret the cultural system of symbolic representations. We should not over-interpret the notion of system in Geertz' essay, but separate it clearly from Luhmann's theory of system, a problem more relevant for the followers of Geertz in Social Science than for us. For theology, nonetheless, Geertz' understanding of system does not offer any clear help for grasping the believers' specific contributions to culture or the uniqueness of religion.

A second more problematic objection is related to his notion of symbol.

Geertz never really explicates what he means by symbol. It seems<sup>26</sup> as if he simply wants to highlight the human ability to make abstractions and to bring together things in many ways with the help of notions and artefacts. Obviously, he wants to show that the empirical reality of Social Science also includes an invisible side, which is revealed in man/woman's capacity to symbolise.

Geertz should not be bound to such a highly ambitious theory of symbolisation as Paul Tillich, rightly criticised by Anders Jeffner.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, by using notions like worldview and symbolic representation he is focussing on the legitimacy of what is quite self evident for the humanities with the notion of «ideas». Nonetheless, his theory here has a serious deficit.

A third objection concerns the implicit functionalism of anthropological theories. Does not anthropology reduce theology to a functionalist

science that only works empirically on the analysis of culture?

Obviously, such a danger exists at present and the theologian therefore should choose his/her partners and theories carefully. I however hope that my presentation of Geertz' pragmatics could make it evident that one cannot locate Geertz in the camp of the functionalist structuralists of his time but could sooner regard his theory as an ally in the struggle for the legitimacy of invisible smooth and verbally ephemeral realities. In my view, a functionalist method (not theory) could be fruitful also for theology, because it would increase its potentials to widen the area of phenomena and interpretational patterns. It would be of damage if functionalism itself dominated the paradigm of theology, but this is not the case in Geertz' pragmatics.

A more sublime trend is taking place in the present development of Religious Studies where I also would like to see more profiled contributions from Theology. To make it short, while one position argues for the identity of Religious Studies totally as a part of Cultural Studies where the notion of religion is exclusively developed in functionalist modes, another position argues for the continuity of so called substantive definitions of religion, which would be able to emphasise the specific characteristics of religion and its academic discipline.

I hope that my discussion here makes it clear enough that my own position argues for an integration of substantive as well as functionalist perspectives on religion.<sup>28</sup> An exclusively functionalist understanding of religion, on the one hand, is highly problematic with regard to the self-understanding of believers and would therefore not be in accordance with the codes of contextualism. An exclusive substantive understanding, on the other hand, would prolong the universalistic modernist paradigm of knowledge building with regard to either confessional or academic power constellations. It would not be

<sup>26</sup> Geertz, op.cit., 91.

<sup>27</sup> Anders Jeffner, *The Study of Religious Language*, London: SCM 1972, 56-60.

<sup>28</sup> «Substantive» means that an understanding of religion must do justice to what Sundermeier, 26f., calls «Transzendenzerfahrung». Theo Sundermeier, *Was ist Religion? Religionswissenschaft im theologischen Kontext*, Gütersloh: Kaiser 1999.



in harmony with the plurality and ambiguity of late modern culture either.<sup>29</sup>

Finally I would like to offer a critique of Geertz' way of thinking which at present is discussed in post-colonial discourse.

Talal Asad, anthropologist and scholar of Islam Studies, discusses how the notion of «religion» is constructed as a central anthropological category.<sup>30</sup> Asad's main argument criticising Geertz is that

there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.<sup>31</sup>

His critical argument furthermore focuses on Geertz' lack of reflection on the dimension of power in religious practices and symbolisations.

Asad's point is that this construction of a theory of religion in itself is a crucial part of a specifically Christian history, and that the anthropologist's concept of religion also continues this history. Theology as well as anthropology in Geertz' pragmatics tends to obscure the distinction between historical events and practices on the one side and the authorizing processes that

<sup>29</sup> Sundermeier, op.cit. 238, reminds scholars of the roots of Religious Studies in its Western context and therefore also in theology, and proposes, 240ff., a differentiated model of the relationship of Theology and Religious Studies with both overlapping and specific spaces. Against approaches who want to develop Religious Studies fully as a part of Cultural Studies (excluding internal perspectives) as for example Kippenberg, 11ff., Sundermeier, 25ff., reminds us of the self-referentiality of definitions of religion (pointing back to the scholar him/herself) and argues for an understanding of religion where both substantive and functionalist dimensions are respected and balanced, and where it is necessary to combine both internal and external perspectives. Hans G. Kippenberg/Kocku von Stuckrad, *Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, München: Beck 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore/London: The John Hopkins University Press 1993, chapter 1, 27ff.

<sup>31</sup> Asad, 29.

give those events meaning and embody this in concrete power sharing constellations.

While Geertz is looking for the common essence in religion, Asad is more interested in the fact that the religious perspective is not everywhere the same.<sup>32</sup>

Following the lines of Asad, Geertz seems to be much more a part of a late mediaeval Christian construction of the postulated essence of religion than one could expect. Evaluating Asad's criticism itself, I would like to emphasise two points.

The criticism of a badly reflected role of transhistorical and essentialist definitions of religion must be taken seriously, in anthropology as well as in contextual theology. The need for a historical self-critical consciousness, especially with regard to normative power sharing negotiating practices where agents form religious institutions and scholars from Religious and Christian Studies are involved cannot be high lighted enough. So far, contextual theology could learn about an important sensibility and reflexiveness from Asad.

But in the line of his own argument, Asad himself should also be asked whether he does not design his argument from a standpoint located outside of context or almost longing for a meta-situated place. One thing is to ask for more contextual awareness about the role of universalistic definitions. It is another thing to ask whether believers themselves depart from belief in a universal power in Christianity as well as in Islam, and that Religious Studies and Theology also need to make justice to this.

Asad is right that a non-reflected analogy of the concept of God and the concepts of transhistorical religion are definitely not the way to solve the problem. However, Asad's postcolonial consciousness about the power generating contexts, where understandings of religion emerge, can only challenge us to dig deeper into the forces behind the birth and construction of belief forms, practices and discourses.

The emphasis that Geertz lays on the universal dimension of religion needs to be criticised if this is to be turned into a general paradigm of religion in anthropology and also for contextual

<sup>32</sup> Asad, 48.

theology. However, the future of an anthropology of religion as well as of contextual theology needs to be developed in a better symmetry and balance of substantive and functionalist, of contextualised as well as of transcultural and trans-historical concepts. The need to reflect the global, planetary, Earth-bound and universal dimensions of religion, and especially of religion in particular specific forms, can and should not be simply swept away by Religious Cultural Studies.

Theologically this whole field of discourse seems to be highly explosive in ongoing debates of scholars in Religious Studies; it could be taken into a construction of the mystery of the Incarnation, where Trinitarian theology makes it possible to focus especially on the dialectics of local and global, cultural and transcultural, contextualising and transcontextualising developments in history and place. Incarnation should not be reduced to Christ's entrance to the world, as Gustaf Aulén rightly claims, but incarnation «is realised in and through the work of salvation».<sup>33</sup> Incarnation is an ongoing process in the world, and contextual theology reflects the experiences of the Here and Now of this ongoing incarnation of the Son and the Inhabitation of the Spirit.

## Theology as Arts and Skill in Atmospheres — Themes for an Open Future

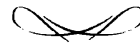
Finally, I would like to point out another direction for the future of a theology in dialogue with anthropology. In our Trondheim interdisciplinary research group on «religion, motion and space», we are discussing at present the approach of the influential British anthropologist Tim Ingold, who offers a new path for navigating between the sharp riffs, pointed out in our discussion above.

Ingold does not offer a similarly high theory on religion as Geertz but his reflection on the physical practices and meanings of skills and

forms of indwelling could offer an exciting path for developing contextual theology in the future into something that no longer would be defined by notions like system, symbols or dogmatics, «livsåskådningsvetenskap» or «hermeneutische Theologie».

It would sooner lead us into the reflection on how we could understand theology itself as a necessary skill to survive as humans in a world of radical cultural transformation. In this regard, theology has much to learn from artists who integrate practical skills, ideational reflexiveness and communicative awareness about contexts of reception in their artefacts and processes of production. Continuing in the path of Marcuse, then the task of arts and theology would be to express what cannot be expressed in any other way in the present culture: «an authentic utopia based on memory».<sup>34</sup> Or to put it a bit more theologically, to manifest God's vision of a liberated creation, based on «the sociocultural memories of local theologies»<sup>35</sup> born in our forerunning believers' *communio* with God.

The investigation of contextual theology as a skill would be at the centre of such an exploration. Theology could then be regarded as physical, sociocultural and discursive skill rather than a system of purely language based hermeneutics or a symbolic cultural pragmatics, and it would then become able to include several aspects of perceiving, acting and thinking about the living and acting God today and tomorrow.



<sup>34</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Den estetiska dimensionen: Bidrag till kritik av en marxistisk estetik*, Göteborg: Röda bokförlaget 1980 (*Die Permanenz der Kunst*, München 1977), 74.

<sup>35</sup> My definition of tradition as «the sociocultural memory of local theologies» is worked out in a discussion with Schreiter's concept of the church's tradition as a «series of local theologies». Cf. S. Bergmann, *God in Context*, 54ff., and Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, London: SCM 1985, 32, 93.

<sup>33</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Dramat och symbolerna: En bok om gudsbildens problematik*, Stockholm: Diakonistytrelsens bokförlag 1965, 305.