



Curriculum Theologiae

European theology facing modernisation and its transformation processes

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[Abstract] Transformation processes in modern Europe not only led to a loss of power and influence for the churches (secularisation), but also to a change in the worldview of the individual: Although in most European countries the majority still belongs to a Christian church, the traditional Christian faith is disappearing. There is still an awareness of transcendence, but on a "lower" level that does not necessarily include an otherworldly God or an afterlife. Theology must face and reflect on this societal situation if it is to retain its importance in Europe. To do this, it is necessary to carefully follow social developments in discussions with other disciplines.

European theology facing modernisation and its transformation processes

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When universities were founded in Europe in the late medieval times, theology was one of the four original disciplines. Philosophy was mainly seen as a logic basis and methodological training for all disciplines and worked as a foundation for all studies. After studying philosophy, students had to choose between medicine, law, and theology. Throughout Europe, some universities were established as a center for one of these disciplines. Paris for instance was a center for theology. From that time on, theology started a long fruitful and successful tradition. I am emphasising this, because I am convinced that theology in our modern time is facing a new and, in its core, different situation which makes it necessary for it to change its strong current concept.

[Traditional self-understanding] In order to make my point, I would like to distinguish between the original situation, when universities were founded, and the present modern situation. I see two major differences: *Firstly*, in the late Middle Ages Christianity was the taken for granted religion of nearly all peoples living in Europe. Islam marked the border and was seen even as an enemy or at least as a field of mission (this idea was enforced in the late medieval time when scholars like Thomas Aquinas attributed rationality to Muslims, thus making it possible to discuss with them and convince them). Judaism was more or less accepted but was not perceived as an equal part of society. Atheism did not exist, at least not in public. To sum up, it was impossible to leave Christianity without leaving society. Leaving Christianity was no real option for the individual. Thus, the point of Christian theology was *self-reflection* of the Christian faith, the church, and society. These three entities were intrinsically connected and belonged together.

Secondly, the fundament of this self-reflection was laid by philosophy, and that means Hellenistic philosophy. That included an important pre-decision. In ancient times, there was a broad philosophic debate, where many different concepts competed, while Plato and the Neo-Platonism became most influential. Their concept inherited a strong desire for unity and truth. This combination made it attractive for Christian thinkers like Augustine, who saw the proximity between the platonic idea of good and truth and the Christian idea of God. Plato and Neo-Platonism taught that we humans can achieve truth not by using our senses, which can delude us, but by using our mind. We have to concentrate on our mind and think correctly. The body therefore loses its importance and is even devalued. In medieval times, Aristotle was reinvented, which led to a new acknowledgement of the senses and empirical work, but this trend did not generally change the negative perception of the body.

These remarks may seem shortened. Still, they make my point obvious: I assume that in most non-European cultures, the self-understanding is different, and therefore a different philosophical basis is needed. And I assume, that catholic theological studies in all parts of the world still include the aforementioned kind of Hellenistic coined philosophy. This circumstance might be a problem for theology in other cultures and it developed a problem for European

theology as well because the self-understanding of the human being and of culture changed in modern Europe .

[Plurality of convictions] In early modern times, the societal setting and – linked with it – the worldview started to change in two ways. *Firstly*, society became increasingly diverse. The first major step in this line of development was taken by Christianity itself: In the 16th century, the unity of Christianity ended in the denominational age. Princes chose their denomination which was then set for their whole empire. Thus, the idea of unity persisted, but this unity was related not to the continent but to different principalities. That was the starting point of modernity. Through the centuries, the situation became more and more diverse, until the 20th century, when, as an aftermath of the world wars, huge streams of migrants mixed the denominational situation. Europe learned that the personal conviction has to be separated from society as a whole. The freedom of religion pushed through.

Additionally, immigrants from outside of Europe brought non-Christian religions into the continent. In every European country, the history of these immigrants is different. In France and England, for instance, Muslim migrants entered the country from former colonies. In Germany however, Muslim migrants came into the country during the economic boom of the 1960s, because the country needed additional workers. This led to a twofold situation: on the one hand, the diversity of religions is widely acknowledged in present-day Europe. On the other hand, movements afraid of change and foreigners identified Islam as a characteristic of cultural diversity which they opposed. We have to notice an increasing Islamophobia in Europe, reinforced after 9/11. In some European countries, we see xenophobic parties. In others like Hungary or Poland, the ruling party tries to connect national identity with the Christian majority. In short, from a cultural point of view these are pre-modern attempts to turn back time. I doubt whether they will be successful on long term.

For theology, there is one major impact: Theology can choose to stick to its traditional task which is to self-reflect on Christian convictions as a fundament of society. That is still necessary, if for instance Christian theology wants to develop some kind of political theology. But even then, theology has to acknowledge the new diverse situation, which is in essence different to the original situation, when universities were founded in the late Middle Ages. If theology persists to understand itself as a self-reflection of Christianity, it keeps its importance for the church, but not for society – simply because church and society are now separated entities (that is expressed by ‘secularisation’). My experience as a scholar at a state university is that the modern European society – at least in Germany – is highly interested in a discipline which reflects on convictions. That means that theology can use its competences on all religions and on non-religious convictions. In this case, when it deals with the whole societal situation, it is appreciated and accepted as important cultural studies. To sum up, theology in Europe can keep its importance if it widens its perspective on the whole societal situation.

[New philosophical approach] For doing so, theology needs a new philosophical framework that is different from the Hellenistic heritage. Not surprisingly, it just has to follow the development in secular philosophy with the linguistic and the cultural turn. These two ‘turns’ have one common message: If we want to understand the world, we have to see its connectedness as a whole, the relativity of everything existing, and that every attempt to talk about the world is coined by our language and culture. What we believe is not an objective fact, not our independent decision, but a result of our societal setting and our experiences. In short: We have to develop a relativistic epistemology.

For theology, a relativistic epistemology is highly compatible with the believe in the one God as the truth, if we see the difference between god’s transcendence and our immanent setting which makes it impossible to have direct access to God. I assume that this differentiation is part of any theological approach at any time. Theology can still keep the idea of unity, but as a transcendent ideal. Within the world, we have to acknowledge and appreciate diversity. If we want to achieve unity *in* the world, then we are doing injustice to reality.

This appreciation of diversity makes it possible to develop a widened understanding of Catholicism: Diversity is of course not just a phenomenon outside Catholicism. We do find many different cultures and ways of being a Catholic, and it might not just be a challenge but a huge enrichment if we accept that. Catholic theology can thus reflect on that diversity inside Catholicism and inside theology itself. Hence, we have to speak not just of theology but of theologies. That might be obvious for theologians outside of Europe, but I guess, it still remains a task for European theology. It goes in unity with the task of developing a post-colonial theology which values the difference between the continents and sees the violence which has been done by trying to slip European thinking over other cultures.

[Transformation processes] That leads to the *second* change in the modern European worldview. So far, I spoke about an increasing diversity, due to processes from inside and outside of Europe. I focused on migration as one important way how other cultures found their way to Europe. European cultures became diverse from inside because of modern processes of individualisation, which means that the individual decides on his or her religion and way of living independently. 'Individualisation' is one aspect of modernisation from a sociological point of view. It goes hand in hand with a philosophical shift towards the individual, which is the main point of the enlightenment: Everyone is able and supposed to use their own intellect to make decisions on and for their own. One message of enlightenment is that we mustn't rely on authority but on our own reason. That included a new appreciation not just of the subject but also of the object, i.e., natural sciences. We don't have to ask a religious authority for what is true and what not, we can investigate on our own. With that the body and the world gained in value.

By doing so, an incredible success story started: Modern natural sciences began to explain nearly everything. Humanity became able to shape and rule the world. If we want to find happiness, we don't have to wait for the afterlife, we can develop new technologies. A huge shift from a believe in transcendence to trusting ourselves started. We don't need grace anymore, we want to take everything into our own hands. Again, these remarks may seem shortened. Still, the described effects are part of a sociological description of the modern world: Sociology points out that in modern times the believe in transcendence is decreasing. Traditional religiosity is losing ground. That affects all traditional religions: the belief in rebirth is quite common in Europe, but not the belief in Nirvana. Many Europeans still believe in a higher force, but not in a personal God and resurrection.

When studying theology, I was taught that all human beings are related to transcendence – and with 'transcendence', my teachers meant 'God'. In this logic, atheists are denying their relation to God – that is, why they are called a-theists. This way of interpreting atheism was valid for pre-modern Europe. But is it still helpful? If you ask someone in East-Germany, after 50 years of communist ruling, whether he or she is believing in God, a typical answer is: No, I am normal. There, it is normal not to believe in God. My guess is that traditional theology is absolutely right in stating that every human being is in relation to transcendence, but that transcendence not necessarily includes 'God' or some kind of absolute reality. In sociological reflection, 'transcendence' means that a human being is exceeding their borders by seeing themselves from outside. In this perspective, 'body cult' means transcending: You see yourself from outside, develop a vision of your body and realise this vision by going to the gym or piercing your body. Sociology would call that a low version of transcendence while believing in God is a high version of transcendence. By using this sociological differentiation and terminology, modernity can be described as a gigantic shift from high to low transcendence.

[Consequences for European theology] The described situation is the case in Europe. The situation might be totally different in other continents. Europe might be a special case in the world. Thus, I see two important challenges for European theology: *Firstly*, it has to acknowledge the described modern situation. In order to understand this situation, it has to rethink its traditional concepts. This is a huge task which touches theology to its core. It makes it necessary to listen and watch anew how people feel, think, and believe. For this, theology needs the

interdisciplinary collaboration with empirical oriented disciplines such as sociology or psychology. Their results will lead to a plural description of modern European societies and their worldviews. If theology wants to face this plurality, it needs the mentioned relativistic epistemology which makes it possible to appreciate diversity and to analyse it from a cultural perspective. Only on this basis it is possible to develop theological approaches which can affirm modernity and deal with it. And only on this basis the church can avoid drifting into opposition to modernity and maybe even fundamentalistic thinking.

Secondly, European theology has to acknowledge its borders, and that is meant both in philosophical and geographical terms: While 'diversity' is a paradigm which is valid for the whole world as part of worldwide 'modernity', it refers to the necessity of analysing cultures and faith each independently. If we do so, if we see the different ways of Catholicism, of Christianity, of other religions and of non-religious worldviews, we can learn from each other and enrich each other. I am convinced that European Catholic theology can learn from other theologies, especially because it has to rethink its roots, those in Hellenistic philosophy for instance. To give just two examples: My impression is that European theology can learn perceiving development positively from Asian philosophy or can question extreme forms of individualism by referring to African notions of family. I think that it is no coincidence that the Club of Rome, an important thinktank in Europe, demands a second enlightenment for Europe: The Club of Rome is telling us, that we have to change our mindset if we want to face the new ecological challenges. I am sure, this second enlightenment can be strengthened by including philosophical and theological thinkers from outside Europe.

[Conclusion] To sum up: This session is entitled "Interdisciplinarity – On the way to contextual relevance". This title includes both demands I would like to make. I wanted to emphasise that Europe is characterised by a shift from a traditional more or less uniform situation to a modern plural situation. Thus, European theology has to comprehend this shift by developing a new epistemology and relying on empirical analyses. Theology necessarily needs interdisciplinary collaboration. And it needs a new foundation in a culture-sensitive approach. When theology appreciates modern diversity, it has to acknowledge the plurality in Catholicism as well and will develop a new contextual thinking.