

Religion as a Sign of Understanding

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AT the end of the first book of his cultural-critical writing, *Morgenröte* (1881), Nietzsche sees himself standing “at the death-bed of Christianity;” and in the clear-sightedness of this situation he believes he sees how the belief in God originated so that—in an allusion to Constantine’s dream-vision, to whom the victorious sign of the cross was shown with the signature “In hoc signo vinces,” he deduced the final aphorism: “There may now be 10 to 20 million people among the various nations of Europe who no longer believe in God—, is it too much to ask that they give each other a sign? As soon as they recognize each other they will reveal themselves,—and they will immediately become a power in Europe and, fortunately, a power between the peoples! Between the sinners! Between rich and poor! Between the commanding and the subjugated.”¹

At first, Nietzsche’s appeal is not so very reminiscent of a sign needing to be given; rather it is of a sign of the times which—in the shape of the liberating “turning point” in 1989—is written on the Wall in the oversized letters of this era.² It is, like all signs of the times, ambiguous. Based on its positive meaning, it infers the end of the divided world, freedom for those suppressed up to now and thus for all, abolition of the antagonism of East and West with its destructive consequences, and, from a Christian point of view, the paradigm of a godly treatment of history and the category of a new understanding of the resurrection.

The Central Challenge

Since unlike a century ago, this does not concern just 10 to 20, but over 200 million people who no longer believe in God or who have—in retrospect to the western territories—renounced religion, Christianity and the church.

At the same time however, it is apparent this new atheism exhibits a manifestation distinct from the previous. Seen in the Eastern perspective, especially important for the mobilization of the religious energy

reserves, the following approximate impression arises: it is no longer the classical, and as such, argumentative atheism as it emerged from the detachment process with its separation strategies put into motion by the age of enlightenment, and as it—highly revealing—had dismissed with John Leslie Mackie’s posthumous work “The Wonder of Theism” (1981) and had withdrawn from the present dispute. It is also not the atheism of the postmodern “arbitrariness” which had broken with the thinking in the horizon of the “Encompassing” (Karl Jaspers) and from the position of the subject, which is identical with itself. It is definitely not the “distressed” atheism, as viewed from the Second Vaticanum; an atheism which inflamed itself through the mistakes of the religious communities, but an atheism which emerged from the systematic exorcism of Christianity; an atheism which won its identity in the process of an oppression of faith through the decades.³

This comprises the hardly recognized central challenge of faith in these times, since faith—as freedom, hope and peace—belongs to the highest goods of humanity. They will not fully come into effect, as they are deprived and withheld from the majority of humanity.

This is basically not the missionary interest but the spiritual hygiene that once again helps the acceptance of the work of the fall of Communism, which completed freedom and hope for all and brought about a worldwide promise of peace and the acceptance of the belief in God, where this was suppressed for decades.

The critical consequence arising through this for the mission strategy—described with the term “new-evangelization”—is that faith cannot be imparted in the traditional patronizing doctrinal way because to the victims of the atheistic propaganda it had been portrayed as the embodiment of an inhuman ideology.

Such a presentation would only revive the meanwhile half-forgotten objections and give rise to new opposition. Together with other reasons which arise from the midst of faith, exactly this consideration indicates a really new interpretation which seeks to express the “old truth” (Pieper) in the present times and *conditio humana* in an appropriate form and language.

The mission’s gigantic dimension results in a fundamental consequence: it cannot possibly be coped with by a single religious denomination or religion, since this would take the united energy of all, who still “believe in God.” And this implies, with the words of Nietzsche, that, despite all differences, they must give each other a sign of understanding to become aware of their power.

Consensus and Differences

Primarily the three revelations or Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—can be considered to be in the wide field of the world religions. Before reflecting on their respective strengths, they would have to reach a fundamental consensus in their very different answers to the question about the entity of the Revelation.

This is because Islam sees the Revelation of God in form of a holy script, the Koran, Judaism sees it in form of “words” which were issued to the bearers of the Revelation; Christianity however sees it in the human manifestation of God.

Concerning the question of the Revelation, the religions are split on the question of its purpose.

For the two Abrahamic religions Judaism and Islam, it is primarily a question of moral instruction for their believers who should orient themselves on the holiness of God through the help of the Revelation.

Christianity has morals, yet its message does not unfold in them.

Rather, the realm of God, the freedom of humanity and his elevation to the fellowship with God stand in the center of the message.

Therefore the conflict, which was carried out between reason and revelation during the Enlightenment, does not dissolve through the insight, as Lessing put it, to relieve man from that which he could have gained through his own effort of thinking but answers the question philosophy and science are trying to clarify in vain—the question of the meaning of life.⁴

The coveted fundamental consensus could then exist in the mutual assumption that God had to break His eternal silence and had to emerge from the darkness of His seclusion if man is to be imparted that which it needs to find the meaning and moral shaping of life, since—in this realm—it attained merely sketches and not fully valid solutions.

However, despite this agreement, far-reaching differences remain, each of which concerns central positions of Christianity. Concerning the differences to Judaism, it is incomprehensible for Judaism that Christians place their hopes on “a crucified person” (c. 10, 2), as Justin says in his *Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon*.

That is the reason, why the comparison with Jesus, who was bereft of all “honor and splendor” and who was strained by “the worst curse” (DT 22, 23) with the Son of Man, who was destined to eternal rule as in the Vision of Daniel, is unacceptable.

Next to Auschwitz, especially the theological reflection on the concept of God pushed by Hans Jonas brought a drastic change to this

topic. It could lead to a reciprocal self-perception: of Judaism with its history of suffering in the cross of Jesus and of the Christian faith towards the crucified in the mirror of the Jewish history of suffering.⁵

Concerning the difference to Islam, it sees the idea of Jesus being the son of God and the dogma of the trinity based herein as “an atrocity,” as the fifth sura expresses (5, 73). Küng comments that the insight by Adolf von Harnack, which was confirmed by Adolf Schlatter (1926) could lead to Islam being considered “a reshaping of the Jewish religion which was itself reshaped by the Gnostic Judaism-Christianity on the grounds of Arabianism through a great prophet.”⁶ Therefore, the Judaism-Christianity, discarded by the Church, lives forth to this day with some of its impulses in a preserved way in Islam, as is depicted in form of the Eboniten.⁷

Since Islam represents the prototype of a religion primarily based on writings, the approach could also be supported in a media-theoretical way. As dying Buddha comforts his disciples with the words that everything about the teaching but nothing about he who discovered it mattered, so does the Koran contain the “very own” words of Allah, whereas Mohammed was inspired only through undeserved mercy that He is “one Allah” (Sura 41,6), he on the other hand was “a human being as a messenger” (Sura 17,94). All weight therefore lies on the message, which is the message itself. The message is the medium. Whereas to Christianity, the words “The medium is the message” applies, as McLuhan expressed.⁸

On a higher level of reflection, an understanding should be initiated since the messenger, who in ancient times occasionally had to die for delivering bad news, is, as this extreme case teaches us, not as uninvolved as Buddha and Mohammed wanted to believe.

On the other hand, he is not as completely wrapped up in it as the Christian equation presumes. For the documentation of the message of Jesus embodied in the writings of the New Testament this means that the self-dignity befits that which is granted by the ecclesiastical doctrine with the qualification of being an inspired writing. For the Koran it means that it is legitimate to ask about the human condition of its creation and that the hagiographic fundamentalism finds no justifications in its origin. But of what does the specific energy of the two competing Abrahamic religions exist and how could it be made productive for the discussion of atheism?

The Specific Contribution

To begin with Islam, this energy obviously derives from the unprecedented realization of how “religio” is generally understood even if this is not the only possibility: re-bonding of man who was released in its creatureness to the reality of its creator and Lords. Since this re-bonding solidifies in relation to the extent as God—almost in the way of the Anselmic proof—is thought of in strict absoluteness, identity and definiteness. According to the Islamic interpretation, Mohammed continued and concluded the work of Jesus exactly herein.

While Jesus overcame the ambivalent image of God in the Jewish tradition and exclaimed it to be the saving unambiguousness but caused the Trinitarian “variety” through being the son of God, Mohammed also eliminated this supposed pluralism through his creed of the absolute one, unchangeable and eternally-identified-with-Himself God. Yet this lent the bonding to Him an intensity and solidity no other religion, including Christianity, had achieved.

This is because everything that could be known by God and everything that should be done in His name stands in the Koran, which contains the thoughts and the decree of the will of Allah and as such allows no interpretation or inquiry. Put in technical terms, it causes man to “get in touch” with God and therefore reaches its unique intensity. If the power of “doctrinaire” atheism is to be broken, this intensity must be activated.

But what will Judaism’s contribution be for the achievement of this goal? A long time before this question was posed, Martin Buber gave the answer in the form of his thesis on the superiority of the Jewish Emuna-faith as compared with the Christian form of belief which is based on phrases.⁹ The trusting faith also shared by Jesus and anchored in the reality of God was compared to the attempted circumscribed truths of religious contents, which is the more original one and therefore the religious way lived and taught by the prophets of Israel. Compared to the contribution of Islam this is merely the reminiscence of its Jewish Origin. What, however, is the specific Jewish contribution to overcoming the “fool”—also mentioned in the Anselmic proof of God—who (according to Psalm 15, 2) says in his heart: “There is no God?”

An indication of an answer to this question are the signs of the times which, as remarked above, are written on the wall of this age especially embodied in the both drastic and gentle fall of Communism in 1989. This is because the prophets of Israel insist that God “speaks” not only through words but also through historical events and makes His will

known. In the bloody subjugation of the northern realm through the Assyrian and the conquest of Jerusalem and the deportation of its upper class through the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, Yahweh intervened punitively in the history of His people who had broken the covenant just as He had freed them from the Egypt's house of slavery in the distant past, had led it to its religious identity and had made it His people through the difficult task of wandering the desert for 40 years as, above all, the prophet Ezekiel describes in the drastic and fascinating metaphoric.

Compared to this, the liberal fall of Communism brought release from despotic arbitrariness and regimentation to countless people and the world the end of the East-West-Conflict, which had caused distraught in political, economical and cultural relationships. It was brought without a leader, without strategy and especially without bloodshed in a virtually paradigmatic form, the case of a historic event that can either be accepted as inexplicable or must be understood as a consequence of a divine intervention.¹⁰

There is however, another answer to the question about the specific contribution of Judaism, which leads back to the contribution, which Islam is expected to give. Resuming the thought that Helmut Merklein presented on the problem of God's singularity the answer assumes that the central concept of Jesus' message, which is the coming of the Kingdom of heaven which has already dawned in Himself, stands in a semantic correlation to God's singularity provided that it expresses the superiority of God of the covenant of Israel over the pagan people and the disempowerment of its gods.¹¹

In Jesus' world of prayer, this corresponds to the request to hallow the divine name. God hallows it through sitting in judgment on those fallen to polytheism and creates a holy people Himself, which indulges Him as the only one. Through this, Jesus refutes the accusation of having entered a plurality into the monotheistic image of God more convincingly than arguments would ever be capable of doing. Yet does it make a specific contribution to elucidate God's singularity?

The Central Achievement in Life

The question refers to the central achievement in the life of Jesus. The question receives this importance because it establishes Christianity's identity. It divides Christianity from Judaism without harming its bonding in as far as it doesn't refer to the singularity but rather to the unambiguousness of God. The God of Israel is, despite His singularity-

ty—just as non-Christian monotheism in general—semantically divided, after all, by the fact that the loving God of the covenant is at the same time the merciless judge.

This is hardly expressed more keenly than at the end of Martin Bubers *Reden über das Judentum* where he speaks of the appeal of the “again and still concealed” and everything finally leads to the sentence:

“In such a state we await His voice, may it come out of the storm or out of the silence following it. May His future appearance not liken any past one; we will recognize our cruel and kind Lord.”¹²

In comparison to this the achievement in the life of Jesus receives its full profile. Since he did not only recognize the political brisance of this image of God which did persuade compassion yet also seemed to justify the religiously concealed act of violence; it also did not correspond with his own experience with God which culminated in his awareness of being His son.

Out of political concern and also through inner desire he therefore interfered in His people’s—and communicated it through humanity’s—idea of faith by erasing that which caused fear and fright from its image of God and instead brought to light the face of the unconditionally loving father. Nothing that had to do with religiously motivated violence and intolerance could stand its ground before this. In this way, Jesus caused the greatest revolution in the history of religion in the gentlest way thinkable: a correction in the service of God’s unambiguousness.

Through this, Jesus enters into an affinity to the oldest as well as to the youngest Abrahamic religion, both of which owe the strength of their access to the believers to the same motive. Since in both cases it is the consequence of the intensity that the relation to God gains when—formulated Anselmically—God is thought of as the unimaginable one, since then the relationship towards Him is reversed and the idea of Him is converted into being moved by Him.

To be Moved Stirringly

Of the three demonstrated possibilities, the middle one is without a doubt the most topical one. To the followers of a religion which counts on a divine interference in the history of mankind it implies that they can enter the analysis of atheism with the rediscovery of a current experience of salvation. In the realm of religion, empiricism matches unequally greater evidence than could ever be assumed through proof or conclusions.

Initially Christianity can only agree with this in a self-critical grateful

manner. Self-critical because it hasn't got the intensive access to the piety and life-design of its followers as Islam and because it—contrary to Judaism—has forgotten to pay attention to the sign of the times which God has written through his power over history.

Its relationship to its followers would, however, intensify if, with regard to Mohammed's teaching of God it were willing to newly acknowledge the revolutionary achievement of Jesus through which he led the ambivalent image of God of his times to the fear-overcoming unambiguity. Yet from Judaism it would have to learn to pay attention to the sign of the times more consciously and carefully and to question their religious relevance in the sense of Jesus' word of admonishment (Mt 16,3).

Nevertheless, concerning His own contribution, it results from the religious central event of the present, the religious-historical change and particularly its axial rotation concerning the relation of Jesus towards faith in him and his message. If up until now Christianity stood so much under the sign of receptiveness that it could be described as obedient subjugation, then today the insight is growing that it is dialogical and this means it is understood as a synergism of believers and believed and must be discovered in its creativity.

After all, in the meantime the symptoms are increasing that the one who is believed in interferes effectively and noticeably in the execution of faith. Without a doubt, Christianity owes its doctrinal form to the fact that in the retinue of the Resurrection, the crucified, the messenger turned into the message, the awakener of faith turned into the object of faith and the teacher turned into the embodiment of the teaching. Yet today, as in all past times of change, a countermovement to this development is beginning. The believed-in steps out of the shrine of concretization; the "Lord" descends from the rostrum of His lordliness; and He who was established as the teaching begins to teach in a new spiritual-therapeutic manner.

The Prerequisite of Cooperation

To the extent to which religious awareness is determined by this occurrence, the shadow is lifted which atheism throws on today's life-world. This is because the conflict with it is already decided in favor of faith through the fact that the one who is believed in comes onto the scene to—as once to the despairing father—call to anybody who wants to hear it: "Don't be afraid; just believe." (Lk 8, 50)

But will the Abrahamic religions which have been estranged since

times immemorial—and on account of the cultural situation they are the ones who are primarily challenged—bring themselves to settle their conflicts in order to bundle their strength to overcome the mutual opponent? Though experience teaches us that we most probably must wait for the second point to occur, the first point can be hoped for concerning the superior challenge. A consequent effort of the three religions to analyze their conflicts and to approach one another is therefore on the agenda.

Of course, this seems to least-correspond to the goal aimed for. The reason for this is tolerance stands under the impression of being indulgence and not of being strength. The general opinion is a person exerting tolerance makes concessions concerning his principles. For “the sake of peace,” he holds back his convictions and at least lacks staunchness, insofar as he doesn’t give up his claim for truth at least in a tactical manner.

Yet this is obviously a very widespread but deficient understanding of tolerance. Actually, tolerance is a great feat comprised of the capability to take on the different-ness of the other without inconsequently adapting to it or weakly being crushed by it.

Tolerance is the preformed royal road in the mythological figure of Atlas and in the Christological figure of the Lamb of God, which is loaded with the burden of sin of the whole world, in such a way that the conflicts of a widely contradictory world dominated by contrasts can be endured peacefully with one another and cooperatively. But being a great feat, tolerance does not lead away from the task set by the atheistic challenge; rather it leads right into the center of its solution.

Notes

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröte. Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurteile I*, (translated from German), § 96.

² See the passage: “Fehlten Tote?” [“Were dead missed?”], in my writing: *Hat der Glaube eine Zukunft?* [Does faith have a future?] (Düsseldorf, 1997), pp. 85–96.

³ John Leslie Mackie, *Das Wunder des Theismus. Argumente für und gegen Gott* [*The miracle of theism. Arguments for and against the Existence of God*] (Stuttgart, 1985); see my writing: *Glaubenskonflikte. Strukturanalyse der Kirchenkrise* [Conflicts in faith. Structural analysis of the church crisis] (Freiburg, 1989), pp. 21–28.

⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* [*Education of the Human Race*], § 4; see H. Thielike, *Offenbarung, Vernunft und Existenz. Studien zur Religionsphilosophie Lessings* [Revelation, Sense and Existence. Studies on the religious philosophy of Lessing] (Gütersloh, 1957), pp. 57–76.

⁵ Helmut Merklein, *Studien zu Jesus und Paulus* [Studies on Jesus and Paul] (Tübingen, 1987), p. 7; Hans Jonas, *Der Gottesbegriff nach Auschwitz. Eine jüdische Stimme* (Frankfurt, 1987); see my contribution about the loss of the attributes and the

answer of Jesus on the question of the Existence God in the present in: *Glauben, Wissen, Handeln. Beiträge aus Theologie, Philosophie und Naturwissenschaft. Zu Grundfragen christlicher Existenz* [Faith, Knowledge, Action. Contributions from theology, philosophy and natural science. On fundamental issues of Christian existence], Editor: Von A. Franz (Würzburg, 1994), pp. 3–16.

⁶ Adolf von Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte* [Outlines of the History of Dogma] (Leipzig, 1939), p. 537.

⁷ H.J. Schoeps, *Theologie und Geschichte des Judentums* [Theology and History of the Judaism-Christianity] (Tübingen, 1949), p. 342.

⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Die magischen Kanäle. Understanding Media* (Frankfurt, 1979), pp. 17–32. The paragraph about Christ's hermeneutics refers to the synergy of this formula with the introductory words of John's prologue.

⁹ See his written polemic: "Zwei Glaubensweisen" [Two Types of Faith] (Zurich, 1950), p. 15 and following pages; 22 and following pages; see my writing: *Buber für Christen. Eine Herausforderung* [Buber for Christians. A Challenge] (Freiburg, 1988), pp. 105–116.

¹⁰ Again see the passage: "Fehlten Tote?" ["Were dead missed?"], in my writing: *Hat der Glaube eine Zukunft?* [Does faith have a future?] (Düsseldorf, 1997), pp. 85–96.

¹¹ Helmut Merklein, *Die Einzigkeit Gottes als die sachliche Grundlage der Botschaft Jesu* [The singularity of God as the objective basis of Jesus' message]. In: *JbBiblTh 2, Neukirchen-Vluyn* (1987), p. 13, p. 32.

¹² Martin Buber, *Der Jude und sein Judentum. Gesammelte Aufsätze und Reden* [The Jew and his Judaism. Collected writings and lectures] (Köln, 1963), pp. 182–183.