

Dialogue and Transformation
On the Way to a Pluralist Religious Pedagogy
A Discussion Paper

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Introduction

The following discussion paper emerged from reflections and discourses by an interreligious project group established on the initiative of the *Bonner Evangelisches Institut für Berufsorientierte Religionspädagogik (bibor)* and the *Pädagogisch-Theologisches Institut der Ev. Kirche im Rheinland* with the title “Elementary Steps on the Way to a Pluralist Religious Pedagogy” at the beginning of the year 2018.

This interreligious project group consisted of theologians and religious pedagogues from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith. In five closed meetings lasting several days, the project group worked on the theological foundations and pedagogical concepts of a pluralist religious pedagogy.

The present discussion paper constitutes the attempt of a systematic bundling of the discussions within the project group.¹ It outlines a framework, presents foundations, unfolds elements and principles as well as further necessary steps of an interreligious justified and substantiated pluralist religious pedagogy and puts this up for discussion.

1 The Theological-Pedagogical Issue

The increasing significance of religious plurality requires new approaches of informed and competent dealing with religions even in the field of education. At the same time, the potentials of religions for the construction of a sustaining orientation and a just, peaceful, and life-supporting world are to be discovered.

Such a religious education relies on the cooperation and the dialogue of people who belong to different religions and religious communities. Moreover, it subsists on the contributions of all people who are in search of answers to elementary questions. Dialogue-oriented interreligious education can refer back to long-standing national and international experiences with the practice of interreligious dialogues. It can refer to academic approaches of an interreligious theology or pluralist theology of religion. Conversely, interreligious education offers the possibility to be a field of application and probation for interreligious dialogue and to make an overall contribution to the expansion and intensification of the relationships between religions and religious communities. This applies especially for the realm of the school in which – as in hardly any other public arena – plurality manifests itself in all facets of religious, cultural as well as social heterogeneity.

¹ Paragraphs 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the discussion paper were produced by Gotthard Fermor, Thorsten Knauth, Rainer Möller, and Andreas Obermann. The three perspectives specific for different religions were produced by Ephraim Meir (2.1), Perry Schmitdt-Leukel (2.2), and Mouhanad Khorchide (2.3). The complete text was discussed and considered by the project group in the closed conference in Neversdorf from 2nd to 5th September, 2019. We thank the Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum for their generous support.

Here, the necessity of dialogical-interreligious approaches of religious pedagogy becomes clear which works out the theological foundations as well as the didactic principles and orientations within the reference frame of a pluralist, interreligious theology.

A religious pedagogy which wants to provide guidance towards perception and understanding of religious plurality and the acknowledgement of the claims to salvation and truth connected with religions overcomes an interpretation related to demarcation and aims at developing a community in which the differences lose their separating effect. We pursue an approach which allows us to transmit religion without necessarily debasing other forms. Rather, we are looking for a favourable assessment of the diversity of the religions. Reaching an understanding of shared baselines and principles of theory and practice in religious pedagogy is the concern of the cooperation between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious pedagogues established in the context of this text. We are looking for a searching move guided by the conviction that an interreligious pluralist oriented religious pedagogy can only be worked out in a joint dialogue of theologians and religious pedagogues from different religious traditions.

Such an approach in religious pedagogy aims at a “new We”² in the sense of a heterogeneous life community. Theologically, this community can be expressed in the image of a shared middle toward which people of different religious backgrounds, with each their own (in)securities of life, are oriented in their beliefs, searches, doubts. The topos of the middle indicates that there are no privileged, let alone exclusive accesses but that it can be reached from different perspectives and positions. At the same time, the image implies a relationship which, centred in an empirically tangible reality, transcends it – not by leading out of reality but, as it were, leading deeper into it. This dimension which can only be expressed metaphorically or symbolically always finds different periphrases in different theoretical languages. It can, for example, be circumscribed as “mystery in the depth of reality”³ or “transcendence”, etc., always meaning a foundational, salutary reality behind everything superficial. We see, in this understanding of trans-cendence, a shared reference frame which also expresses a shared concept of religion in the context of existential searching moves and consequently guides our understanding of religious learning processes.

We connect the basic theological-hermeneutical approach of our reflections with the term “depth-theology”⁴. Thus we formulate a shared hermeneutical foundation with regard to the understanding of the human encounter with transcendence. “Depth-theology” does not mean a material approach of theology but rather a certain way of understanding the emergence of theology from the encounter with transcendence. It is a theological-didactic framework obtained from the religions and in which each their specific perspectives can be delineated.

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, such a “depth-theology”⁵ reflects the fundamental questions of

² Cf. Manuela Kalsky: Auf der Suche nach einem neuen “Wir”. In: Junge Kirche (2014), 32-33.

³ Cf. e.g.: Paul Tillich, In der Tiefe der Wahrheit. Stuttgart 1952

⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, Gott auf der Suche nach dem Menschen; id., Depth-Theology. In: Cross-Currents 10,4 (1960), 317-325.

⁵ Abraham J. Heschel, Erneuerung des Protestantismus. Eine jüdische Stimme, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1985, 143.

human beings and tries to establish answers. By depth-theology, Heschel understands a reflection about the existential confrontation with fundamental questions of life which, as it were, constitute the body of experience for living out faith. Depth-theology reflects the pre-theological implementation of existence and uncovers the experience-rich original situations of religious statements. In Heschel's perspective, the human encounter with God takes place in a pre-conceptual, pre-institutional, immediate way. Man has experiences, bearing witness for the Divine or Transcendence in the interpretation of them. Concepts and symbols are not sanctified nor are they an image of transcendence, but they rather allow, as it were, like a window to transcendence, a view of it. According to Heschel, Man is a transcendence-related being which can, among other things, manifest itself in the act of being astonished. Heschel's depth-theology is less focussed on the contents of theology which can be expressed in doctrinal truths but is interested in immediate human experiences in dealing with the in-depth dimensions of reality out of which faith unfolds.⁶

Thus, such a “depth-theology” requires a shared openness for deep human experiences which, as it were, are situated *before* (“pre-theological”, Abraham Heschel) the particular questions and answers of the religious communities that are often related to one's own concerns, as they are often communicated in intra- and interreligious contexts. The global societal challenges of our time and age the serious effects of which move people today cause fundamental anthropological questions to become conscious again. They require jointly reflected depth-theological answers by the religious communities. We understand *depth* as one of several possible metaphors which mark the horizon of transcendence shared by all religions before any theological structuring. While they can only be formulated from the respective perspective of each religion, these perspectives can nevertheless be directed in a way that a shared reference becomes clear, for example through the fact of the shared perception of the unavailability and the inexpressible nature of that which constitutes the core essence of transcendence. But even the discovery is shared that it is exactly there that salutariness becomes expressible. The assumption of a shared transcendental basis of our reality allows, at the same time, to speak interreligiously of a “unity of reality”.⁷

Seen in this way, religion emerges – also in its reflected content as theology – from an existential search movement and the experiences with salutary transcendence in the process of this search movement that must be described as pre-theological. It is to be understood as a search in which certainty can very well be possible. But it is a search in so far as the movement always remains open for growth and development and is thus constitutively connected with learning. The elementary modus of this search is questioning. Elementary questions set the search in motion and direct it simultaneously: What makes me strong in life? What helps me to deal with weakness? Where do I find meaning in my actions? How do I bear meaninglessness? With whom can I share my life? How can a shared life succeed? How do we create a world worth living in? What will remain of me? Is there anything at all that will remain of me? Which hopes can guide me? Where do I come from? How can I understand and interpret all those forces, circumstances, and

⁶ Cf. also Ephraim Meir: Religion, Menschenrechte und Tiefentheologie, in: id., Interreligiöse Theologie: Eine Sichtweise aus der jüdischen Dialogphilosophie, Münster/New York 2017, 62 f.

⁷ Cf. Michael von Brück: Einheit der Wirklichkeit, München 1986; cf. also Perry Schmidt-Leukel: Wahrheit in Vielfalt. Vom religiösen Pluralismus zur interreligiösen Theologie, Gütersloh 2019, 209-214.

movements which determine my life like an unavailable gift?

These and other existential questions, in their elementary and fundamental character, can connect and establish a partnership in search. A heterogeneous learning community can be understood as a community of questioners. From this follows, in terms of religious pedagogy, an approach which starts from the elementary and existential questions of the learning subjects. Answers which have their adhesion point and their resonance space in religious traditions are searched for in a dialogical process.

The fact that even representatives of religious communities are jointly searching for answers to fundamental questions on the background of their being anchored in their respective religious tradition corresponds to this subject-oriented approach. Questions which initiate a joint searching movement can become a starting point for a pluralist religious pedagogy.

What follows here is an exemplary presentation from authentic perspectives of how representatives of religions who participated in this project theologially interpret the relationship between a *salutary relation to transcendence* and *religious pluralism*.

2 The “Salutary Relation to Transcendence” and the Issue of a Religious Pluralism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

2.1 The “Salutary Relation to Transcendence” and the Issue of a Religious Pluralism in Judaism

Ephraim Meir

With regard to a pluralist religious pedagogy, I present Jewish-soteriological relevant thoughts on Transcendence.

First, I will define terms and describe what I mean with a salutary relation to transcendence before I present a Jewish view.

2.1.1 Soteriological Relevance of Religious Traditions

In interreligious theology, it is assumed that all religions relate to transcendence. Transcendence is higher than life but rooted in it, giving meaning to it. In that sense, JHWH, Allah, Trinity, the Tao, Brahman, or the Nirwana all transcendent, accessible but inexpressible, outside of human reach and language.

“Salutary” for all

The relation to the transcendent is considered “salutary” if it is helpful and peaceful for all human beings and not only for a particular group. Thus, that is salutary which is soteriologically relevant for humankind as such.

A central condition for a salutary relation to the transcendent is that exclusive truth claims are omitted which separate and lead to the formation of identities against the negative background of religious others.

Dialogue and relevance for the world⁸

I believe that the interreligious or dialogical theology has a dialogue with the Other as an aim and as a method. From this perspective, religion for its own sake is problematic. Dialogue theology rather searches for a look at transcendence which is ethically, socially, and economically relevant for today's societies. Dialogical theology assumes a look at the I as I in a relationship. Belonging is not only belonging to a particular group but also belonging to humankind as such. Wilfred Cantwell Smith rightly remarked that it is no longer possible to talk about religious Others as “they” and that it is better to talk with religious Others

⁸ Cf. Ephraim Meir: *Dialogical Theology and Identity. Trans-Different Religiosity*. In: *Present Day Societies*, Berlin and Jerusalem 2013. Id., *Interreligious Theology. Its Value and Mooring in Modern Jewish Philosophy*. Berlin/Jerusalem 2015 (= *Interreligiöse Theologie. Eine Sichtweise aus der jüdischen Dialogphilosophie*, Berlin/Jerusalem 2016) as well as id., *Becoming Interreligious. Towards a Dialogical Theology from a Jewish Vantage Point (Religions in Dialogue 14)*, Munster/New York 2017.

about “us”. In his world theology, some of us are Jews, some of us Hindus, some of us Christians etc. In such a perspective, belonging is first of all belonging to humankind although one also belongs to a particular group.

In a dialogical theology as I imagine it, belonging to a particular group and belonging to humankind as such are not mutually exclusive. Instead of breaking up particularities into general categories or forgetting the world in a parochial perception, belonging to a particular group can be combined with belonging to humankind as such. There is no general human being, but the particularities should consider the supra-specific, i.e. the relationship with the elementary which exists in all human beings.

I reach the conclusion that, from the perspective of an interreligious theology, the religions of the world all have a salutary message, and that is their common structure. Since the different religions have different views about what is salutary, it is to be examined in how far these different views contribute to the common good. Therefore, the next paragraph deals with dialogical elements in Jewish tradition and in Jewish philosophy which may be inspiring for a positive and creative interaction with religious people.

2.1.2 Inspiration through Jewish Dialogical Thought

In this paragraph, I point out dialogical moments in Jewish tradition and in Jewish philosophy which makes it possible to recognise religious Others, to learn from them, and to offer them hospitality. Not everything in Jewish tradition is consistent with an interreligious mindset. In any case, the tradition does not exist to sanctify what was in the past but to transmit the fire concealed in it. With the words of Gustav Mahler: “Tradition is the preservation of the fire and not the worship of the ashes.”

Therefore, I will approach Jewish tradition selectively, distilling from it the core of dialogue, and I will add insights from four Jewish philosophers who are useful for interreligious dialogue and interreligious theology.

2.1.2.1 Inspiration from the Bible and Post-Biblical Jewish Tradition

“So God created man, as an image of God he created him. As male and female he created them” (Gen. 1, 27): all human beings in gendered differentiation in many nations are, in their plurality, equally dignified in God's view.

- “Are not you Children of Israel the same to me as the dark-skinned? Declares JHWH:

Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9,7): the liberating act of God applies equally to the Children of Israel and all nations.

- The Talmudic disputations (machloket) describe different intra-religious opinions without disqualifying dissenting views.

- This could serve as a model for interreligious dialogue. Jewish intra-religious plurality as documented in the Jewish post-biblical sources of Talmud and Midrashim is relevant for the interreligious plurality. The

Rabbinic statement, “This and that are the words of the living God,” (Talmudic tractate Eruvin 13b) refers to the manifold interpretations (the “Seventy Facets”) of the Torah. This could be expanded beyond the boundaries of the Torah and applied to all religions and world views which are related to each other in the search for the transcendent.

- The Talmudic tractate “Chapters of the Fathers” offers insights which contribute to a pluralist perspective. I give you some examples:

“Rabbi Jochanan the Shoemaker said, Every assembly that is dedicated to the promotion of noble goals out of pure motives will ultimately endure, but that which is not for noble goals and out of pure motives will ultimately not endure” (4:14); “He [Hillel] used to say, If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?” (1:14); Ben Zoma said, Who is wise? He who learns from every person” (4:1); “He [Rabbi Akiva] said, Beloved are human beings because they have been created in God's image” (3:18).

- Rabbi David Kimchi (ca. 1160-1235) commented on Psalm 145:18 (“Near is he to all who call on him, to all who call him in truth”): “From whatever nation they may be, as long as they call him in truth, that their mouth and their heart are equal.”

- Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 8:1 presents a story of a dispute among the angels in heaven when God decided to create Man. The Angel of Loving Care was in favour: Man was charitable. The Angel of Truth objected: Man was full of falsehood. The Angel of Justice agreed that they should be created, but the Angel of Peace resisted. God took Truth and threw it on earth, as it says, “Truth will sprout from the earth” (Ps. 85:11a). The conclusion is that Man must search for truth which “sprouts from the earth” in a laborious process. Truth is the result of the humility of humans who recognise that their truth is relative and that it grows between them in peaceful fellowship. This Midrash is inspiring for the construction of an interreligious theology in which cognitive humility is one of the pillars. In the same sense, Jonathan Sacks writes: “Truth arises from the process of expanding our world through the presence of others who think, act, and interpret their reality in a way which is radically different from ours.”⁹ (9) Truth is connected with people who relate to each other.

- The Hebrew word *'emèt* that stands for truth is basically the trust with which the transcendent is approached. Understanding *'emèt* as trust is a condition for a successful interreligious dialogue.

- The Rabbinic proverb, “Common decency precedes the Torah” (Midrash Vayikra Rabba 9:3) means that correct, ethical behaviour precedes any religious education. Without a good relationship with (religious) Others, religious life is impossible. Ethical behaviour is perceived as a condition for religious life.

- Nothing is so specific that it could not somehow be translated into other languages. In fact, translating is an act of peace in which a bridge is built between the world of the Other and one's own world. The proverb, “The Torah speaks like the language of the people” (Talmudic tractate Berakhot 31b) points out that the Torah is written in human language. Divine messages are always translated into a human language that transmits the divine. Consequently, no religion is so unique that it would be totally untranslatable, without any connection to religious Others.

On the contrary, all religions which are the result of a human encounter with the transcendent are reactions to

⁹ Jonathan Sacks: *The Dignity of Difference. How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. London 2006, 23.

the manifestation of the transcendent in human language. That the Torah is written in a human language also means that a religious message is always to be set into its context, as a means against fundamentalist interpretations of religion.

2.1.2.2 Inspiration through Hassidic Thought

Buber reconstructed religious anthropology by taking up Hassidic sources again. In his narrative soteriology, he emphasises various dialogical elements. In his creative reinterpretation of Hassidism, he reconstructed a universal religious way. In my interpretation of Buber's interpretation, I apply his universal religious insights to the interreligious level. I will give you some examples:

Buber tells two Hassidic stories. Rabbi Bunam once said after reaching old age when he was already blind, "I would not like to trade with our father Abraham. What use would it be for God if Abraham were like the blind Bunam and the blind Bunam like Abraham?" And Rabbi Zusya said shortly before he died, "In the world to come, I will not be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' I will be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya.'" Buber concludes that each Jew and, in fact, each human being has their own way to serve God. There are many ways to the transcendent and all are irrevocably specific.

On the interreligious level, a multitude of religious ways are open to Man; no way resembles the other. Being conscious of the multitude of religious thoughts and lifestyles leads to the recognition of many aspects within the transcendent. Every single colour in Joseph's colourful garment is necessary and receives its uniqueness through the unmistakable combination of all other colours. Each member of a religious group shapes their own religious world view and each religion is unique and incomparable with other religions.¹⁰

2.1.2.3 Inspiration from Dialogical Jewish Thinkers

- In his *I and Thou* (1923), Martin Buber (1878-1965) developed a transformative thought about relationships which are relevant for interreligious dialogue. He writes: "A person becomes a self only through encountering the other," and, "In the beginning, there is the relationship." For Buber, the relationship with God takes place in the relationship with the Other: "Every single Thou is a window to the eternal Thou." The presence of the I before the Other makes the Other present and moves the divine presence into view. Although Buber was more interested in religiosity than in religion, he considered religions necessary because they create "a new appearance of God in the world" to the extent as they relate to their living source and force, the always present Thou. Buber belongs to a growing movement of rational thought in which the isolated self is considered a mental construct.

- In Franz Rosenzweig's (1886-1929) masterpiece *The Star of Redemption* (1921), the commandment "You shall love" (Deut. 6:5) is in the centre. Although he only concentrated on the (dialectical and critical)

¹⁰ For a complete presentation of my interreligious interpretation of Buber's Hassidic stories see E. Meir: *Becoming Interreligious* (cf. Note 8), 49-58.

relationship between Judaism and Christianity, his thoughts about the connective link “and” are helpful for pluralising theology. Even his construction of a positive identity is exemplary for interreligious thought. Finally, he developed substantial thoughts in translation as the readiness to share a common world: “There is only one language. There is no idiom of one which could not be traced, at least embryonically, in every other one, even in dialects, nurseries, sociolects. This essential unity of all languages and the resulting commandment to universal human understanding substantiates the possibility as well as the task of translating, its can, may, and shall (Jehuda Halevi, Twenty-Nine Hymns and Poems). Rosenzweig also relativises the significance of the religions by saying that God did not create the religions but the world. With the words of Perry Schmidt-Leukel, God is “without boundaries”.

- In his lecture, “No Religion is an Island” (1965), Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1965) inspired many people to enter into interreligious dialogue. Religion as such is not the goal: “Religion as an institution, the Temple as the highest goal or, in other words, religion for the sake of religion, is idolatry. [...] Religion is about God. The human side of religion, their actions, rituals, and specifications, are the way rather than the goal. The goal is to 'practise justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your Lord.’” In his article, “Religion and Race”, Heschel emphasises divine inclusivity: *each god who is mine but not yours*; each god who cares for me but not for you is an idol. From Heschel's perspective, humanism, the struggle for human rights, and religiosity go together. This led him to get engaged in the Afro-American struggle in the United States and his protest against the Vietnam War. Heschel's connection of religion and socio-political commitment is exemplary for all religions.¹¹

(11) Cf. Ephraim Meir, *Old-New Jewish Humanism*. Tel Aviv 2018

- In his “Totality and Infinity”, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) reflects on the possibility of a relationship which is based on the recognition of the exteriority and the otherness of the Other without waiting for reciprocity. He defines religion as the relationship between the self and the Other without totality. The ethical, infinite commandment of the Other urges the one subject to respond. The I is the “Here am I”, the one for the Other. Levinas' ethical metaphysics has great significance for realising a salutary plural relationship with the transcendent.

2.1.3 A Trans-Different Theology

In the footsteps of the aforementioned Jewish thinkers and inspired by dialogical elements in Jewish tradition, I develop a dialogical philosophy and theology in which differences are accompanied by dialogue and communication. I use the term “trans-difference” as the possibility for establishing connections and contacts with others, for communication and bridging, not irrespective their differences but thanks to this fact. The goal of religions is not separation but cultivating proximity to the Other. In trans-difference, the Same and the Other are thought together; one recognises the particular and transcends it. An interreligious

¹¹ Cf. Ephraim Meir, *Old-New Jewish Humanism*. Tel Aviv 2018

theology in which trans-difference is at the centre works with central concepts like learning, translating, recognising, deep listening, and hospitality.

2.2 The “Salutary Relation to Transcendence” and the Issue of a Religious Pluralism in Christianity Perry Schmidt-Leukel

2.2.1 Religious Pluralism and the Transcendent-Immanent God

Christians believe in the existence of God – a reality which transcends everything Other and, precisely for that reason, is simultaneously immanent in everything Other. With respect to all limited, finite reality, God appears as the non-finite or infinite reality while, as such, being immanent in all finite reality at the same time because that infinite is not as different from the finite as finite realities differ from each other. Thus, God is radically distant (Jes. 55,9; 661) and near (Acts 17,27ff), radically different and yet the Other. Thus, God may and must be spoken of in images, metaphors, and parables which mirror the human experience of God's presence in manifold ways while simultaneously bearing witness for the consciousness that no image and no dogma will ever be able to catch up with God's absolute transcendence.

Whoever confuses the image or dogma with God himself, violates the First Commandment, worshipping instead a self-made idol (Ex 20,4). Whoever believes to have recognised God may be told, by Augustin, that it is not God whom he has recognised (Augustinus, Sermo 117). *Deus semper maior* – God is always greater – is, therefore, an ancient Christian principle which tradition bears witness for almost continuously and which has been disregarded only by some rationalist theological strands of modernity.

Even God's revelation does not cancel transcendence and, along with it, God's general unknowability. In revelation, God's immanence becomes apparent as something that is infinitely surpassed by God's transcendence. The “sense and taste for the infinite” (F. Schleiermacher) manifests itself in every genuine revelation because the infinite God expresses himself in it. Thus, the dialectical tension between, on the one hand, the finite recipient and, on the other hand, the infinite God remains. Christian pluralists like the Reformed theologian John Hicks and Wilfred Cantwell Smith take up this strong tradition in traditional Christianity and not least with Calvin.¹² From the fact that no image is able to represent God in his infinite being-as-such, they conclude, however, that a legitimate multiplicity of figurative approaches and testimonies of the one God is possible and necessary. The multiplicity of images mirrors the multiplicity of the human experiences in which God's immanence is revealingly manifested.

Even the doctrine of Trinity that developed only after the third Christian century may, therefore, not be

¹² *Finitum non capax infinitum*: the finite cannot contain the infinite.

misunderstood as a correct description of God's inner essence (as a so-called "immanent Trinity").¹³ It rather reflects, in the sense of a salvation-economical Trinity, three different human experiential approaches: God of whom we become conscious as the merciful Source of Being (father/mother), God who encounters us through human beings like Jesus (son/daughter), and God who moves us in our innermost selves (spirit).

Already Thomas Aquinas justified the multiplicity of valid divine names with the assumption that God's actual being rises above anything that human reason is able to grasp. Therefore, we can, according to Thomas, express God only in a multiplicity of approaches. But in contrast to modern pluralists, Thomas had not considered that a new interpretation of religious diversity is also possible in this way – an interpretation which was formulated as follows in a consultation by the WCC in Baar in 1990: "We need the diversity of the religious traditions both as the result of the manifold ways in which God related himself to peoples and nations and as a manifestation of the wealth and the diversity of humankind."¹⁴

2.2.2. Pluralism and the Revelation in Jesus Christ

The tension between God's figuratively transmitted immanence and unassailable transcendence persists also on that self-manifestation of God which, according to Christian conviction, happened in Jesus Christ.

Already Adam, according to the Biblical tradition, was created in God's image. But this image of God was distorted by sin. Thus, Jesus appears to the Christian faith as the new Adam. As such, he is, as formulated in Colossians (1,15) in a paradox way, the "image of the invisible God". God remains invisible in principle and can thus not be represented. But in Jesus, the human image of God takes a new, concrete shape.

At the centre of Jesus' preaching, there is the reign of God (the "Kingdom of God") or, more precisely, the merciful and fatherly nature of God's rule. God rules differently from the princes of this world for whom it is just a matter of their power (Mark 10,42). God is "kind towards the ungrateful and evil" (Luke 6:35). He "lets the sun rise over bad and good people and he lets the rain fall on the just and the unjust" (Matth. 5:45). Therefore, submitting to God's rule means to pass on the mercy received from God. "Be merciful, as your father is merciful!" (Luke 6:36)

This is precisely what Christians consider realised in Jesus. Not only does he preach God's merciful rule. He rather submits to it and implements it in his speech and actions, even in his whole person. Thus, Jesus becomes the epitome of his message. In him, the eternal Word of God is embodied (John 1,14), in which God confirms himself as the merciful (1 John 4,9; Titus 3,4). Therefore, the First Epistle of John: "Everyone who loves originates from God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God" (1 John 4,7f). This applies to Christians without any restriction. Whoever does not want to dispute seriously that true love exists both among Christians and non-Christians cannot dispute either that genuine knowledge of God exists both

¹³ Cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel: *Gott ohne Grenzen. Eine christliche und pluralistische Theologie der Religionen*, Gütersloh 2001, 296-301.

¹⁴ Religious Plurality. Theological Perspectives and Affirmation (Statement of the WCC Consultation, Baar 1990). In: *Current Dialogue* 19 (1991), 47-51, esp. 48.

among Christians and non-Christians. But then it cannot be denied either that genuine knowledge of God is reflected even in non-Christian religions. Why should it be an expression of highest revelation when it says, in John's Epistle, "God is love," (1 John 4,16) but, at the same time, be wrong or somehow deficient if the same statement can be found in many different ways in other religions? If God relates to us as it is revealed through Jesus, then – as Wilfred Cantwell Smith rightly argues – it is impossible to limit salutary knowledge of God exclusively to Christianity.¹⁵ If God gives sunlight and rainwater – and thus the two foundations of their biological life – indiscriminately to all human beings, how should the same undivided merciful God then deny the greater part of humankind that which they need for "eternal life", that is, for their lives in a salutary relationship with God?

Thus, a pluralist theology of religions is well anchored in Christology, as John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Alan Race, Paul Knitter, Roger Haight, and others demonstrated. In Jesus Christ, God's universal will for salvation which includes all human beings *is represented* (1 Tim 2,4) but it is not only *constituted* through Christ.¹⁶ If one were to assume that God's mercy – and thus the foundation of salvation for all humans – were only constituted through the death and resurrection of Jesus, then that would make the whole message of the earthly Jesus wrong. Even Paul naturally proceeded on the assumption that already Abraham lived in a salutary relationship with God the possibility of which was not first created through cross and resurrection. On the contrary, for Paul, Abraham is, with his trust in God, the archetype of the one who is justified through faith (Gal 3,6f). It is precisely in his death on the cross that Jesus bears witness that God's mercy even includes those who caused him to be crucified. Thus, the cross makes it clear that nothing can separate us from God's love as it has appeared in Jesus (Romans 8,31-39). "The story of the life of Jesus up to the cross is recognised and confessed to as an expression of God's unconditional and precursory love for human beings (John 3,16; Romans 5,8; 8,31f; Eph 2,4; 1 John 4,9f).¹⁷ Jesus constitutes the salutary relationship with God only for those to whom God's love becomes manifest only through him. But precisely that does not exclude but includes that, if this love is, indeed, "precursory" and "unconditional", it can be witnessed in many ways by all people. According to the Christian faith, God has always been the God of all people and need not become that through a conversion to Christianity.

"Jesus, as a mere human being, differed from the father as the one God and submitted to the claim of the coming rule of God the way he asked his audience to do the same. Thus, he could dismiss the deferential address "good master" (Mark 10,18) by pointing to God as the only good.¹⁸ This exegetically undeniable fact must be considered today by any appropriate Christology – completely independent of questions of a

¹⁵ Cf. Wilfred Cantwell Smith: *Towards a World Theology. Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, Basingstoke 1981, 171

¹⁶ For the differentiation between an interpretation of the "Christ-event" as representative for salvation and one that is constitutive for salvation, cf. Ogden Schubert: *Gibt es nur eine wahre Religion oder mehrere?* In: *ZtgK* 88 (1991), 81-100

¹⁷ *Für uns gestorben. Die Bedeutung von Leiden und Sterben Jesu Christi. Ein Grundlagentext des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)*, Hannover 2015, 33

¹⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg: *Systematische Theologie. Volume 2*, Göttingen 1991, 415. Cf. also the same assessment by Hans Küng u.a.: *Christentum und Weltreligionen*, München/Zürich 1984, 184.

theology of religions.

For the theology of religions, however, two significant consequences result from this. In particular, this shows the justification of those Jewish and Muslim objections which are directed against an equation of the man Jesus with God. That Jesus himself, as a mere human being, is different from God while simultaneously embodying (“incarnating”) tenets of God's merciful rule in his person is taken up by those new Christological concepts which understand Jesus as a “symbol of God” (Paul Tillich)¹⁹, Roger Haight²⁰. For the symbol differs from the symbolised while yet sharing its reality: the symbol points beyond itself to the symbolised, simultaneously making it present. From this follows, for a Christian and pluralist theology of religion that there are, even must be, many valid and salvation-transmitting symbols of the divine reality if this reality is for us, in fact, as it is shown in Jesus. As a symbol of God, Jesus thus keeps his normative value from a Christian perspective. This does not exclude that there are further normative symbolic transmissions of a divine self-attestation in other religions. It merely excludes that these, in their core, should contradict the message of God's mercy.²¹ At the same time, it must not be forgotten from the Christian side, that Jesus could by no means become a symbol of God for all people. It is precisely the exclusivist interpretations of him which prevented that. With the name Jesus Christ, so the rabbi and historian Michael Signer, he associates “hate and unlimited suffering which came through him over the Jewish people.”²² And with that, he probably speaks for many Jewish people.

2.2.3 Pluralism and Salutary Transformation

God's mercy as it is manifested, for Christians, in Jesus, can liberate, as Martin Luther expresses it, human beings from the “distortion in themselves” to real knowledge of God and charity.²³ Salvation, as John Hick expresses it in a similar way, consists in the transformation of Man from selfishness to being centred on the divine reality, the authenticity of this transformation becoming obvious as compassion and love are manifested.²⁴ The formulas of Luther and Hick mirror, clearly recognisably, the gospel of God's mercy which only enables Man to implement the double commandment of loving God and our neighbour and thus the fundamental commandment of God's rule. From this understanding of salvation follows, at the same time, the criteriological yardstick according to which religions – including Christianity – are to be measured: “The value of religious traditions and their different elements (convictions, modi of experience, scriptures, rituals, schooling paths, ethics, lifestyles, social rules, and organisations) is measured by the question whether they promote or obstruct the redemptive transformation.”²⁵ This means that the salutary transformation can be

¹⁹ Paul Tillich: *Systematic Theology*. Volume 2, Part III: Existence and Christ, Chicago 1957.

²⁰ Roger Haight: *Jesus Symbol of God*, Maryknoll/New York 1999.

²¹ Haight: *Jesus* 406-410

²² In a panel discussion in Munich on 24th March, 2003. Reported by Ulrich Winkler: *Christologie im Kreuzverhör. Wider die Diastase von Israeltheologie und Religionstheologie*, *Salzburger Theologische Zeitschrift* 8 (2004) 30-61, 30f.

²³ Martin Luther, *Weimar Edition* (WA) 3, 183,4

²⁴ John Hick: *Religion. Die menschlichen Antworten auf die Frage nach Leben und Tod*. Munich 1996, 182, 325.

²⁵ Hick: *Religion*, 323.

promoted and carried out in manifold ways without everything that happens in a religion always being beneficial.

Hick highlights that even the formula of the salutary transformation can be reversed into its opposite unless it stands the test of life reality. Thus, he takes up the important objection by feminist theologians that the Christian doctrine of self-denial was precisely not liberating for women but reinforced their subordinated status. Accordingly, Hick emphasises that a genuine self-transcendence requires a strong self. For him, the feminist struggle for gender justice is a central aspect of how salutary transformation is implemented socially.²⁶ (26) Moreover, he warns against an individualist narrowing of the concept of salvation. Following the prophetic criticism of Biblical tradition, he emphasises that, in Christian understanding, salutary transformation must include the liberation from political and economic evils²⁷ – a concern which was placed into the centre of a theological pluralism by Paul Knitter in particular.²⁸

2.2.4 The Fundamental Pluralist Issue: Diversity and Equivalence

An interreligious religious pedagogy must confront the fact that all greater religious Traditions in the past and, in many cases, until the present time, claimed either an exclusive validity of the proclaimed faith and the salutary ways connected with it or an inclusive supreme validity. That means, they deny that other religions are equivalent with regard to claims to salvation and truth. The assumed fallaciousness or inferiority of other religions is derived from their otherness. Only if they were to equal one's own religion in all aspects, they could also be considered as equivalent.

In other words, based on an exclusivist or inclusivist self-understanding of one's own religion, religious diversity cannot be connected with equivalence. From this perspective, no permanent religious value can be attributed to religious diversity. It may be accepted socially. But in the theological sense, it presents, for exclusivists and inclusivists, an unavoidable evil or something preliminary that, at best, is to be tolerated for the sake of religious freedom.

This is where the theological objections by religious pluralists start. They attribute more than a mere preliminary value to religious diversity without, however, facing it uncritically. By no means do pluralists confuse a normatively justified theological equivalence with relativist carelessness. They confront, on the one hand, relativist arbitrariness and, on the other hand, an absolutist disparagement of otherness with the alternative that diversity, even in the field of religion, can constitute an enrichment and is not to be reduced to a diversity of errors. Rather, a truth may appear in it that refracts in a multitude of justified positions. Thus pluralism in the theology of religions is far from ignoring or negating the differences of the religions. It

²⁶ Hick, *Religion*, 69.

²⁷ Hick, *Religion*, 327-330.

²⁸ Cf. Paul Knitter: *Horizonte der Befreiung. Auf dem Weg zu einer pluralistischen Theologie der Religionen*. Edited by Bernd Jasper, Frankfurt a.M./Paderborn 1997.

defends itself against limiting religious difference to the exclusive pattern of irreconcilable opposites.

Pluralists assume that the so far dominant exclusivist and inclusivist variants are by no means the only genuine possibilities for a self-understanding of the religions. Therefore, pluralist positions are not developed beyond the religions or over their heads but within the religions themselves: pluralists critically confront those concrete arguments which, so far, substantiated the claims of superiority or exclusivity of one's respective own religion, and they work out those fundamentals of one's own faith tradition in a constructive way on the basis of which religious diversity can be combined with religious equivalence. In so far, religious pluralism exists only in a religion-specific form: as Jewish, Christian²⁹, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist etc. pluralism.³⁰ As such, they pave the way for a new constructive coexistence of the religions.

Thus pluralists are positioned in the tradition of the ecumenical efforts of their respective religions. For even internally, there is the task of combining variety and diversity with equivalence. The connection of difference with equivalence is, moreover, a core issue of feminist theologians from the most different religions. This is based on the distressful experience that, traditionally, gender difference had been, as a rule, connected with inequality. By recognising that this problem exists in several religions, feminists develop a religion-transcendent interest in emphasising liberating motives in the different religions.³¹ A fair number lean towards a pluralist theology of religions because they recognise in it a structurally related issue.

2.2.5 Religious Pluralism and Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is possible even without a pluralist theology of religions. But a pluralist theology of religions is not possible without dialogue. An open dialogue can effect that exclusivist or inclusivist attitudes change. Leading representatives of a Christian and pluralist theology of religions like, for example, W. C. Smith, J. Hicks, P. Knitter or also R. Panikkar, entered dialogue as exclusivists or inclusivists and became pluralists only through experiencing dialogue.

If interreligious dialogue is carried out starting from exclusivist or inclusivist conditions, then it serves aims like, for example, one's own profiling through demarcation and a mutual assurance of tolerance in the sense of indulgence, the regulation of a relatively conflict-free coexistence, the implementation of a missionary agenda, or the demonstration of one's own claims of superiority. Pluralists, on the other hand, connect dialogue with the expectation to learn, in and through dialogue, more about what the divine reality means to the concrete Other and humankind in total and what new insights result from the wealth of the religious traditions of the world for a deepened understanding of life in it. Here, dialogue becomes a genuine source of theological knowledge, thus frequently taking the shape of an interreligious theology.³² It is then, in a very

²⁹ Cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel: *Gott ohne Grenzen* (cf. note 13)

³⁰ Cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel: *Wahrheit in Vielfalt* (cf. note 7), 26-27 and 37-169

³¹ Cf. Carola Roloff/Katja Drechsler/Marius van Hogstraaten/Andreas Markowski: *Interreligiöser Dialog, Gender und dialogische Theologie*, Munster 2019.

³² Schmidt-Leukel: *Wahrheit in Vielfalt* (cf. note 7) 171-372.

central way, a matter of a better understanding of religious claims to truth. For it can only result from dialogue where agreements, complements or also contrasts are really situated. Therefore, as the Christian pluralist Leonard Swidler put it in his influential “Ground Rules for Dialogue”, “each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are ...”³³

In dialogue, it becomes obvious that it is precisely religious claims to truth are highly determined by an existential dimension. It is frequently a matter of the truthfulness of one's own existence in the first place. Salutary “faith” - according to Wilfred Cantwell Smith – describes an authentic personal relationship with the world, with the neighbour, and with oneself in the light of Transcendence and must not be confused with merely taking beliefs for true. “One's faith is given by God, one's beliefs by one's century.”³⁴

Beliefs have an important role in the traditions that must not be neglected. But reducing it to the multitude of “beliefs” to be encountered in the religions which kept changing many times in the course of history would be a curtailment of dialogue. In dialogue, we primarily learn to understand our own “faith” better.

Does the pluralist theology of religions impose a preconceived, abstract understanding of transcendence on the religions which subordinates or even ignores the particularities of the individual religions? This frequently found criticism thoroughly misses the concern of pluralist theologies of religion. For each of the great religious traditions of this world already assumes the existence of an ultimate reality which transcends all superficial reality while yet appearing in it. This conviction is cultivated in the religions themselves and not phrased only by pluralists. When Christians profess God as the creator of the heaven and the earth, then they naturally assume such a reality that is related to all religions because even the religions are doubtlessly a part of “heaven and earth”. Therefore, the actual question cannot be if there is a reality that precedes all religions. The question is rather if Christians (and by analogy people of other religions) seriously expect this one ultimate reality is also known in the respective other religions because it “did not leave you without evidence” (Acts 14,17) among the nations.

But did God perhaps give evidence of himself less clearly, less impressively, less salutary among the Others? The answer is given by the Gospel itself: whoever loves knows God. And if there is no indication that love, the most excellent fruit of the spirit (Gal 5,22; 1 Cor 13,13) is stronger and more alive among Christians than among people of other religions, then there is no reason for the assumption that God gave evidence of himself to Christians in a superior or even exclusive way. Such an assumption would profoundly contradict Jesus' message of that God whose mercy has always been equally valid for all people. This is the core of Christian pluralism. In Germany, the arguments of pluralist theologians have so far been ignored to a great extent or were represented in a distorted form and rejected as such. The time has come to acknowledge them and take them seriously, thus discovering the potential that they contain.

³³ Leonard Swidler: Die Zukunft der Theologie. Im Dialog der Religionen und Weltanschauungen, Regensburg/Munich 1992, 29.

³⁴ W. C. Smith: Belief and History. Charlottesville 1977, 96

2.3 The “Salutary Relation to Transcendence” and the Issue of a Religious Pluralism in Islam

Mouhanad Khorchide

2.3.1 Salutary Relation to Transcendence from a Muslim Perspective

Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam understands itself as a religion of revelation. That is, the starting point of the Islamic religion is the faith in one God who revealed himself as himself to humans. In this revelation, God “unveils” his essence to humans. Revelation means that God engages in Man; he makes himself accessible to people, he enters history, he makes himself tangible to their experience.³⁵ Through God's revelation in the world, God becomes present here and now. Remaining wholly himself, he, at the same time, reaches humans in categories that are understandable for them. Thus, revelation is, for the monotheist religions of revelation, “that central but also suspenseful theological basic category which tries to think transcendence and immanence, absolute and finite, unconditional and conditional, divine and human freedom, to the extent that it emphasised the general distinction of both realities.”³⁶

However, not all Muslim scholars past and present share this understanding of a dialogical revelation. Until today, there is even the idea that God's revelation is a monological instruction by God, it is the communication of a book which is the be the eternal word of God.

Therefore, I see the urgent necessity for a paradigm shift in the understanding of revelation. The starting point for this paradigm shift in the question of the concept of God in Islam. Is it a matter of a monological concept of God, concerned with itself, or is it a dialogical communicative concept of God the concern of which is a relationship with Man? Is the question of salvation in Islam a theocentric or an anthropological one? Is the concern God or a dialogical God-Man relationship?

This differentiation between a monological and a dialogical communicative access³⁷ to Islam is an ideal-typical one for a better reflection of the talk about pluralism in Islam. For our discussion, it is important, at the same time, to understand where the intra-Islamic demarcation line lies. For if I stand up here for a dialogical-communicative understanding of Islam, this does not mean that it is the only possible interpretation of Islam; precisely in Islamic mysticism, manifold variants and interpretations of Islam can be found which primarily put the purification of the heart into the foreground, thus emphasising the ethical-spiritual dimension of Islam.³⁸ While the bandwidth of positions existing in reality mostly consists of hybrid forms of both accesses, they tend, however, either to the one or to the other direction.

In the understanding of the monological model, God is concerned solely with himself. And that is why he created humans and commanded them to worship him in a particular way. The question of salvation is thus connected with Man's fulfilment of this expectation of God. Proponents of this understanding cite the

³⁵ Mouhanad Khorchide: Gottes Offenbarung in Menschenwort. Der Koran im Lichte der Barmherzigkeit, Freiburg i.Br. 2018

³⁶ Magnis Lerch: Selbstmitteilung Gottes. Herausforderung einer freiheitstheoretischen Offenbarungstheologie, Regensburg 2015, 17.

³⁷ Cf. Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid: Gottes Menschenwort. Für ein humanistisches Verständnis des Koran. Freiburg i.Br. 2008.

³⁸ Cf. Raid Al-Daghistani: Epistemologie des Herzens. Erkenntnisaspekte der Islamischen Mystik. Cologne 2018.

Qur'anic verse Q 51:56: "I created the jinn and humans only that they serve me." Today's Muslim exclusivists think that this divine expectation can only be fulfilled by being a Muslim. Consequently, Islam is the only way to salvation. They cite the two Qur'anic verses, "The religion with God is Islam," (Q 3:19) and "Whoever wishes for a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him. In the hereafter, he is then one of the losers," (Q 3:85)

According to this monological access to Islam, religious Man is an object of religion. Because he does not determine himself but God utilised him that God may be glorified by him. Accordingly, God's favour (salvation) and anger depend on the respective attitude of Man. Only someone who has faith in God, confirms God's existence, and fulfils God's instructions (primarily the religious rituals) is grasped by salvation.

Islam as a religion would be the aim as such because, according to the monological model, God cannot be glorified in any way other than by being a Muslim. Salvation is inseparably connected with this being a Muslim. There remains no space for a plural attitude of religions.

The framework of this essay does not allow to deal with the arguments for this monological access to Islam in detail, therefore, only the following may be said: if God had created the world because he needed it in any way or were dependent on it in ontological respect or because it would be a matter of God himself or his glorification, then this would no longer be about a God perfect in himself or of one God. For God does not need creation to be truly God. God is "akbar" (greater than) in the sense of Anselm of Canterbury's famous formula, "God is to be understood as that being beyond whom nothing greater can be thought of." A God sufficient in himself is greater than a God who depends on creation. The concept of a Unitarian God, therefore, does not do justice to the concept of a perfect God at all. A Unitarian God would have to bring forth creation to be worshipped to only then realise his own perfection.³⁹

However, a God who is perfect in himself, who is greater than it could be thought, does much more justice to the perfect concept of God than a God who lacks something and who is dependent on human worship. A God who is perfect in himself does not need creation. Rather, he gives unconditionally.

The idea of a God who is perfect in himself (and thus God in general) thus implies that God's unconditional concern is Man.⁴⁰ And precisely this concept of God is the starting point of the second model, the dialogical-communicative model.⁴¹

In the following, I would like to outline the consequences of that other approach to Islam regarding the question of salvation in catchphrases.

³⁹ Cf. Clark Pinnock and Robert C. Brown: *Unbounded Love*, Eugene 2000,48, as well as Clark Pinnock: *Most Moved Mover. A Theology of God's openness*, Ada 2001, 125

⁴⁰ Cf. Hans Kessler: *Sucht den Lebenden nicht bei den Toten: Die Auferstehung Jesu Christi*. Kevelaer 2011, 291.

⁴¹ Explanations of both models in Mouhanad Khorchide: *Gottes Offenbarung im Menschenwort. Der Koran im Lichte der Barmherzigkeit*, Freiburg i. Br. 2018, 81ff.

* The Concept of God in Islam

A God facing humans unconditionally is a God of love. The Qur'an says that God creates humans "whom he loves and who love him" (Q 5:54). The law of love is freedom. Thus, it is a matter of a human being endowed with freedom.

This is also demonstrated in the Qur'anic narrative of creation (Q 3:30ff): only after he had eaten of the forbidden tree, Adam who stands symbolically for Man was able to fulfil his mission as a vicegerent (caliph) on earth, to be a mediator of divine love and mercy. Islam does not know of any doctrine of original sin because, according to the Qur'anic narrative, Adam was immediately forgiven – sin was not what mattered in the "fall". Much more important was his consciousness that he can and should be self-determined.

This narrative stands symbolically for the central position of human freedom as a constitutive moment of being human. However, freedom does not mean mere arbitrary freedom of choice but deciding for what is reasonable. Without reason, Man follows his instincts, but in virtue of his reason, Man is able to recognise the good and direct his own behaviour accordingly.

* The Concept of Man in Islam

Man is described as caliph in the Qur'an. This is meant to illustrate the concept of Man. He is the medium for realising God's intention for love and mercy if he makes himself available to that purpose in freedom.

According to the dialogical-communicative approach to Islam, God makes himself dependent on Man because he intervenes into the world only through humans: "God does not change the state of people before they change themselves" (Q 13:11). He uses Man's will and action by inspiring him with his will and by repeatedly making offers to him. But it is ultimately up to Man's sole decision if he cooperates with God or not.

The divine love and mercy as the goal of creation, on the one hand, and its realisation here on earth, on the other hand, are two sides of the same coin. According to Islamic thought, Man is communicative being; he stands in a dialogue with God, with himself, with fellow human beings, and with creation. The following story told by the Prophet Muhammad gets to the heart of the thought of how divine service can be implemented in its life-worldly environment:

"In the Hereafter, God will ask a man, 'I was ill and you did not visit me, I was hungry and you did not feed me, and I was thirsty and you did not give me anything to drink.' Surprised, the man will then reply, 'But you are God, how can you be ill, thirsty, or hungry?' Then God will reply to him, 'On the day so and so, an acquaintance of yours was ill and you did not visit him. If you had visited him, you would have found me there with him. On that day, an acquaintance of yours was hungry and you did not feed him, and one day, an acquaintance of yours was thirsty and you did not give him anything to drink.'"⁴² This narrative reminds of

⁴² Transmitted according to Muslim, Hadith No. 2569.

the Gospel of Matthew which contains a similar story, pointing out in the end, “What you did for one of my least brethren, you did to me.” (Matth 25,40b)

Thus, the God-Man relationship is to be understood not as a relationship of submission but as a relationship of love and thus a relationship of freedom.⁴³ If human freedom is to be preserved and protected, then God will interfere in the world only in a way which does not destroy that freedom. Therefore, God lays claim to human freedom to facilitate freedom. It is primarily Man who realises God's intention to love and mercy and turns it into a tangible reality in the here and now. This contains the highest acknowledgement of Man. He is God's partner, in Qur'anic language the caliph, in turning the divine intention into reality.

Therefore, divine and human action must not be put into a relationship of mutual competition. On the contrary, the following applies: the more man supports the release of freedom, the more God's intention is realised. Man's support for the release of freedom is implemented in his action in the sense of love and mercy. Therefore, both of them must become the end of human acts in themselves.

* Salvation in Islam

According to this understanding of the God-Man relationship, the question of salvation cannot be detached from human action. Therefore, living and practising one's faith means to be there for God, saying yes to the cooperation with Him in implementing his intention of love and mercy. This yes is, however, not a verbal one but a testimony expressed through human action. Thus, faith as such (in the sense of assent to God's existence) but also one's affiliation with a particular religion does not become an end in itself. Not religion is the aim but the testimony of human faith in love and mercy in actual life.

Even the practice of religious rituals is not an end in itself but a medium of spiritual and ethical enrichment of a person. They are an act of divine worship only if they make a real contribution to serving his creation. Religious life, understood as constructively unfolding one's spirituality as well as one's personality, as highlighting one's talents and capabilities, as working on one's character, training, and education, as taking over responsibility for one's fellow human beings and one's environment, as being committed to cultivating the earth both on a material and in a spiritual level, is in harmony with the life plan of any responsible human being.

* A Pluralist Understanding of Salvation

Thus salvation can in no way be limited to members of religions but refers to all those who bear witness to love in their lives. This position is shared by well-known Muslim pluralists like Muhammed Arkoun, Hasan Askari, Mahmut Aydin, Ali Asghar Engineer, Farid Esack, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Abdulaziz Sachedina, and Mohammad Shabestari.

Mahmoud Ayoub is, today, considered one of the most renowned Muslim theologians who represents the

⁴³ Cf. Zakarīya Ibrahīm: *Muškilāt al-Hurriya*, Cairo 1972, 136.

position that even religions other than Islam are salutary and to be considered of equal value with Islam concerning the realisation of the divine reality. He bases his attitude on the Qur'an, arguing that the Qur'an itself wants to promote religious pluralism and describes religious plurality as willed by God. Hereby Ayyub primarily refers to the two Qur'anic passages Q 2:62 and Q5:69.⁴⁴

The Pakistani Fazlur Rahman argues in a way similar to Ayoub.⁴⁵ Among other things, he refers to a Qur'anic statement that is repeated a few times: "If God had wanted to, he would have made humankind a single community but they still disagree with each other" (Q 2:213; Q 10:19; Q 11:118).

For the scholar of Islamic Studies Abdoljavad Falaturi, one of the most important conditions for constructive interreligious dialogue is "distancing oneself from the insistence on owning an exclusive truth".⁴⁶ Whoever assumes himself as owning the truth and sees the other only in error, deprives the dialogue of its foundation from the very start: "The concept of an exclusive bliss for the members of one's own faith and condemnation for all others is nothing but a one-eyed constriction of the divine love and mercy and an egocentric paternalism against God. Sharing out heaven or paradise and hell among different human groups or showing off as a gatekeeper of heaven and hell testifies to a naïve concept of the Man-God relationship."⁴⁷

In an essay about religious pluralism, Abdulkarim Soroush quotes John Hick's book *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* in which Hick asks himself questions which quite obviously impressed Soroush very much. Questions like: Why should my Muslim and Jewish friends be a lesser object of God's love? Does he really love them less than me, the Christian? What did I do that they didn't? Were there fewer saints or good people among Jews and Muslims than among Christians? Did they commit more sins than we Christians?⁴⁸

If the question of salvation is less dependent on the affiliation with a certain religion but more on ethical human actions, then this opens up a foundation for a plural society in which religion no longer constitutes a boundary between people but a bridge between them. Because the more religious one is the one who is more available for his fellow human beings, as a hand of love and mercy. This means for Islam that Islamic Theology must urgently overcome religious exclusivism, for heaven does not belong only to Muslims and God does not permit himself to be taken in by anyone, he remains unavailable. Heaven belongs to the humanitarians who take on charity as a guiding principle. I highlight this point because religious exclusivism in the sense that only Muslims have access to salvation is still a very widespread ideology which does, however, makes it difficult to present a foundation for acknowledging the Other. Exclusivism implies that God would sentence innocent people to eternal hell – not for what they did but just because they are not Muslims. They bear the wrong label. That, however, would not be a merciful but a violent God.

⁴⁴ Cf. Mahmoud Ayoub: *Islam and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism*. In: *Global Dialogue* 2 (2000) 1, 1-12.

⁴⁵ Cf. Katajun Amirpur: *Den Islam neu denken. Der Dschihad für Demokratie, Freiheit und Frauenrechte*, Munich 2013, 91-116; cf. also Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Chicago 1982.

⁴⁶ Abdoljavad Falaturi: *Hermeneutik des Dialogs aus islamischer Sicht*. In: A. Falaturi (ed.): *Der Islam im Dialog*. 5th expanded edition, Hamburg 1996, 157

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Cf. Abdolkarim Soroush: *Saratha-ye mostaqim (Straight Paths)*, Tehran 1999, 20.

2.3.2. Important Qur'anic Foundations for a Pluralist Position

Perry Schmidt-Leukel sees the theological foundation of an Islamic pluralism primarily as resting on three Qur'anic pillars: firstly, a confirmation of a general possibility for salvation for all those who live in true awe of God and righteousness even if they are not nominally Muslims (2:62; 2:213; 5:72; 20:112). Secondly, the conviction that God left no nation without the revelation or prophetic guidance necessary for this purpose (Q 5:19-48; 10:47; 14:4; 35:24). Thirdly, the acknowledgement of God's absolute transcendence that surpasses all forms of human expression (Q 17:43; 37:180; 112:4; see also 11:118).⁴⁹

Besides, the following Qur'anic positions can be summarised:

* The confessional diversity among people is willed by God

The Qur'an even speaks of an aim of creation, that there are different ways to God: "And if your Lord had wanted, he would have made people one single community [...]" (Q 11:118).

Now if the diversity is willed by God, then Islam does not strive to eliminate diversity, on the contrary, it appreciates diversity, even the ideological and confessional one, and wants to facilitate it. Therefore, the Qur'an deals less with homogenising the world but with encouraging people to handle diversity constructively in the sense of empathy, respect and appreciation of the Other in his "Otherness". Moreover, the Qur'an points out that striving to eliminate diversity constitutes striving for mischief; "[...] and if God had not checked one group of people through the other, the earth would have been corrupted [...]" (Q 2:251; cf. also 22:40).

* Against religious exclusivism

In the Qur'an, the Truth (al-Haqq) is specified as one of the names of God. God is the truth and not religion(s). Therefore, the absolute truth remains unattainable for humans, human can only approach it. Exclusivist people make the mistake of assuming that they have grasped God and have an exclusive claim to him. The Qur'an teaches, however, that it is part of the Muslim truth claim that God wills diversity and also wants to protect it (Q 22:40; Q 5:48; Q 2:113; Q 10:19; Q 11:118). This is not at all to be seen as a relativisation of one's truth claim but it is not necessarily the only right one. Therefore, the necessity of differentiating between the claim to absoluteness (exclusivism) - "My religion is the only right one" - and one's truth claim - "My religion is right but others can be right as well" - is so important. Man can only be free if he affirms the freedom of the Other, opens up to the Other. However, if he shuts himself off, he deprives himself of his own freedom.

⁴⁹ Cf. Schmidt-Leukel, *Wahrheit in Vielfalt*. (see note 7), 77-93

* Only God judges between people, namely in the Hereafter

Here, the Qur'an speaks a clear language and highlights that only God is entitled to the competence of judging between people concerning their ideological and confessional affiliation on the Day of Judgement (Q 22:17 and Q 32:25). This implies a clear rejection for all those who ascribe to themselves the competence to judge over humans and to send some to paradise and the others to hell.

* The Qur'an prohibits compulsion concerning religion

The Qur'an prohibits any compulsion in faith: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:256). In this context, the Qur'an criticises the attitude of compulsion as an attitude of the deniers but not as that of the prophets and the believers.

The Qur'an's inclusivist promise of salvation

As its wording makes clear, the Qur'an promises eternal bliss even to non-Muslims: "The Muslims and those who belong to Judaism, and the Christians and the Sabians – (all) those who believe in God and the Last Day and act righteously, will have their reward with their Lord, and they will neither fear nor grieve (on the Day of Judgement). (Q 2:62).

And: "(But) they are not (all) equal. Among the People of the Scripture, there is (also) a community which stands (devoutly in prayer), (people) who recite God's verses at (certain) times at night, bowing in prostration. They believe in God and the Last Day, enjoin what is right, prohibit what is reprehensible, and compete (in making an effort) for the good things. They (will ultimately) belong to the righteous. And whatever good they do, they will not be deprived of it. And God does know the righteous. (Q 3:113-115: see cf. also Q 3:64; Q 4:123-125)

* The plural forms of Gods revelations

The Qur'an appreciates the Torah and the Bible as holy scriptures and calls the prophets to judge between those who are Jews and Christians according to their books: "But how can they make you a judge while they have the Torah in which God's decision has been presented [...]" (Q 5:43). Besides, the Qur'an asks the Jews and the Christians to hold fast to the Torah and the Bible and to integrate them into their lives: "Say: People of the Scripture, you are based on nothing (with regard to your beliefs) unless you hold fast to the Torah and the Gospel and what has been sent down to you (as a revelation) by your Lord [...]" (Q 5:68), "And if the People of the Scripture had believed and feared God, we would have taken away their bad actions from them and admitted them to gardens of bliss. And if they had kept the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them (as revelation) by their Lord, they would certainly find nourishment above them and at their feet. There is a moderate group among them, but many of them – evil is what they do" (Q 5:65-66)

* The appreciation of Jesus as a revelation from God

The Qur'an describes Jesus not only as a conveyor of a message but he himself, his life, and his works are the contents of this message. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Qur'an builds up parallels between itself and Jesus: Both are signs of God for the people which he gives to people to show them mercy. Both are God's word. But both are also God's spirit and both were proclaimed by the Holy Spirit. It is precisely the equation of Jesus with God's spirit which points to his richness of spirit and provides an opportunity for Islamic theology to see the function of Jesus in a different light, that is, as the content of the divine message (without seeing him as divine). Thus, the Qur'an points out that God did not only reveal himself in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an also appreciates the followers of Jesus, promising them a special significance: “(At that time) when God said, 'Jesus, I will (now) recall you and elevate you to me (in heaven) and purify you, that you are carried away from the deniers. And I will cause those who follow you to be superior to the deniers until the Day of Resurrection. (But) then you will (all) return to me. And I will judge between you about that in which you disagreed (in your life on earth).’” (Q 3:55)

The emphasis on the continuity of all divine messages

The Qur'an does not at all understand itself as discontinuation, as breaking away from the holy scriptures before it, on the contrary, it rather considers itself their confirmation. “And we sent down the scripture to you with the truth, to confirm what there was in the scripture before it and to give certainty about it [...] For each of you we defined a (particular) tradition and a (particular) way. And if God had wanted to, he could have made you one single community. But he (divided you into different communities and thus) wanted to test you by what he has given you (as revelation). So compete for the good things. To God is the return of (all) of you. And then he will inform you about what you disagreed on (in your life on earth)” (Q 5:48; cf. also Q 10:37; Q 12:111; Q 2:89; Q 2:101; Q 3:81; Q 6:92; Q 2:41; Q 46:12; Q 2:91; Q 2:97; Q 4:47). It appreciates the Torah as guidance, as a mercy and a light (Q 5:44; Q 5:91; Q 6:154; Q 7:154), likewise, the Bible is appreciated as guidance and light (Q 5:46).

* In the Qur'an, Islam is not an identity and a designation of a particular religion but an attitude

The Qur'an calls everyone who directs his life towards God, that is, to the unconditional love and mercy, a Muslim, therefore, Abraham, for example, is called a Muslim in the Qur'an (Q 3:67 and Q 2:132-134) as well as Lot (Q 51:36), Noah (Q 10:72), Joseph, the son of Jacob (Q 12:101), Moses (Q 10:84), Solomon (Q27:91), and the followers of Jesus (Q 5:111).

Very often, representatives of an exclusivist position refer back to the following Qur'anic verse in order to highlight their rejection of other religions: “The Religion with God is Islam [...]” (Q 3:19 as well as Q 3:85). In doing so, however, they overlook that the term “Islam” in the Qur'an does not designate a particular

religion but merely faith in the one God. That means: directing one's life towards God in the sense of unconditional love and mercy.

* All human beings have dignity independent of their ideological affiliation

The Qur'an emphasises that God bestowed dignity on the Children of Adam (that is, independent of a particular religious affiliation) (Q 17:70). Because God's spirit was breathed into each human being (Q 15:28); the divine within the human is the foundation of human dignity and ultimately also of diversity and its preservation.

* The Qur'an speaks of an anthropological yearning of Man (fitra) for Transcendence

Therefore, each human individual yearns for the unconditional love and mercy, every human yearns for self-transcendence in search of this experience. In religious language, one would say, every human being is in search of God even if he does not use religious language for this because it is not language that matters. The Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1997) describes Man as a being with a natural disposition for wanting to open up.⁵⁰ This means, Man has a basic need for freedom. In this context, Frankl speaks of a basic anthropological fact that being human always points beyond oneself: "The real essence of Man is existence, and the ultimate meaning of life is transcendence."⁵¹ Therefore, the essence of human existence is the transcendence of itself.⁵² and not the imprisonment in one's own self. Thus, man yearns for freedom, he wants to perceive himself as a self-determined subject and not at all as an externally controlled Object, and this can only be done if he can relate to himself in freedom and to reflect himself, which happens when he transcends himself to contemplate himself from outside. Therefore, the consciousness of the significance of one's freedom and its realisation in human life is constitutive for being human.

2.3.3. Two Important Challenges for Religious and Ideological Pluralism

The first challenge consists of the confusion between religion as a way do salvation and religion as an exclusive identity which is then declared the aim of being religious (I belong to Islam, and it is only because of this affiliation that I am collected by salvation). It is especially Muslims who are strongly affected by this fact because, as a rule, they perceive themselves (more or less) as an ostracised minority here in Germany. There is, therefore, the urgent wish to protect one's religious identity (of being a Muslim), namely through a superelevation of one's own religion. This is what makes religious exclusivism especially attractive. At the same time, a danger for losing one's identity is seen in a pluralist attitude.

The second challenge consists of the question of the surplus-value of faith or religion. My explanations imply that religions primarily deal with ethics. Doesn't that open religion for being replaced by reason? What

⁵⁰ Cf. Viktor Frankl: *Ärztliche Seelsorge*. Frankfurt a.M. 1987, 201.

⁵¹ Id: *Anthropologische Grundlageder Psychotherapie*. Bern, 1975, 362

⁵² Cf. id: *Der Mensch vor der Frage nach dem Sinn*. München 1995, 100

role does the faith in a God have? What is the purpose of God if that what counts and matters is the ethical/just behaviour of Man? These questions must be answered authentically even by pluralists to protect pluralism against the accusation of making God replaceable by ethics.

2.4. Three Perspectives on Salvation and Transcendence and Their Contribution to a Pluralist Religious Pedagogy

Part of designing a pluralist theology and religious pedagogy is generating reasons, motives, and concepts from the religious traditions themselves that can base the relationships between religions on a non-hierarchical foundation characterised by mutual recognition.

In this sense, three persons reconstructed, in the previous paragraphs, how a salutary relationship with transcendence is conceptualised in their religions, grappling with their traditions.

The emerging tests formulate, from different religion-related perspectives but sharing the pluralist condition, that no religious tradition has an exclusive and superior access to salvation.

Ephraim Meir assumes that all religions show a salutary relationship with transcendence. It is part of the salutary relationship with transcendence that salvation is valid for all humans and beneficial to them. It is precisely this universal orientation of salvation, however, which means that no religion can rise an exclusive claim to truth or – phrased positively: that it is relegated to dialogue. A dialogical theology is only possible when the religions consider themselves as belonging to a human family. Referring back to concepts of dialogue of the Jewish tradition and philosophy, Meir reconstructs elements of a dialogical theology which are also inspiring for a pluralist religious pedagogy. These are the constitutive connections of the relationship with transcendence and interpersonal relationship, the significance of language and translation in the interreligious relationship, the necessity of self-criticism of religions and the relegation to the Other whom the I owes its responsibility and recognition. According to him, the telos of a dialogical interreligious theology lies in a concept of a commonality which is reached through acceptance and a dialogical way of dealing with difference, which Meir describes as “Trans-difference”.

Perry Schmidt-Leukel reconstructs, in his argumentation, positions of a pluralist theology of religions from which a critique of any exclusive claims to salvation can be formulated. All religions relate to an ultimate reality the truth of which they share perspectively but which is not available to them exclusively. In that respect, salvation is, even from a Christian perspective, always only available as bound by perspective (particularity) and thus constitutively dependent on the dialogue with other religions. Considering Christianity's salutary relation with Jesus Christ, he formulates a Christology through which the Christ-event can be interpreted as representative for God's will to salvation so that even other forms of representations of God's will to salvation can be thought in other religions and for other people. For him, the peak of the Christian message of salvation lies in the significance of the Christ-event for the primacy of love and mercy

in their universal scope and their interreligious dimension.

It is Mouhanad Khorchide's concern to substantiate the salutary relationship with transcendence in the framework of a dialogical theology of revelation. The dialogical motive of this theology leads to a fundamental reinterpretation of the God-Man relationship: in this reinterpretation, the concept of *fitra* assumes an important role. Human yearning for transcendence corresponds to a movement on God's side towards Man. Man fundamentally yearns for meaning and God needs man to realise love, justice, and mercy in creation. It must be highlighted that salvation also applies to people whose orientation and relationship with transcendence finds an adhesion point outside religions. The mutual dependence of love and freedom is a central element of Khorchide's dialogical approach.

For a pluralist religious pedagogy, the motives derived in the discussion with the three religions offer important impulses:

- A pluralist religious pedagogy depends on a type of relationship in which the relationship between people of different religions and world views is not based on demarcation, separation, and exclusion. A pluralist religious pedagogy is dialogical in its fundamental structure and can only be developed in dialogical arrangements.
- The human need for surpassing oneself (transcendence) substantiates a religion pedagogical approach in the learning subjects and their existential questions and yearnings for meaning and viable orientations. This approach tries to uncover religion in its pre-theological and pre-conceptual form and to relate it to the human question for meaning.
- Pluralist religious pedagogy assumes that religions can give shape to these attempts at orientation with texts, symbols, rituals, and performed actions.
- Pluralist religious pedagogy also has the task to question religions critically where they contribute to developments hostile to life and it criticises tendencies to make one's own views and claims of validity absolute.
- Pluralist religious pedagogy highlights the important contribution of interreligious learning and dialogical cooperation for the peaceful and solidary coexistence of people in a shared world.
- Pluralist religious pedagogy does not ignore disputes, differences, and conflicts between people of different religions and world-views. It emphasises, however, the transformative power of dialogue from which commonalities may emerge through the differences.

3 General Conditions and Societal Relevance of a Pluralist Religious Pedagogy

The necessity of an interreligiously and dialogically dimensioned religious pedagogy results with regard to its societal relevance (1.) from practical requirements, (2.) with regard to the relationship between lived religion and religious institutions, and (3.) from lasting societal and global developments which also apply to religion.

3.1 Practical Requirements

In religious-pedagogic operating contexts, a religiously, culturally, and socially heterogeneous situation has long since emerged. This initial situation necessitates a reflection of the present concepts of mono-religious responsibility theologically from the existence of different religious traditions, their self-understandings, and validity claims. In order to counteract an unrelated islandisation of religion-related educational offers and thus a fragmentation of religious education, interreligious cooperation, as well as a responsibility in the field of public religious education shared by different religions, is socially and theologically advisable and necessary.

This results in the task to interrelate these different religious Perspectives which simultaneously appear with normative claims in order to expand and deepen the understanding of the one reality through multi-perspectivity. In this process, it is also essential to note that different religious – and partially contradictory – traditions exist not only between the religious communities (interreligious difference) but also within individual faith communities (intra-religious difference). Therefore, it is a matter of considering the different and normative claims both inter- and intra-religiously.

3.2 Lived Religion and Religious Institution

The importance of dialogical interreligious cooperation also results from the perspective of lived religion through which those commonalities in beliefs and religious practice of different religions can become apparent which do not become visible through the mere consideration of the institutionalised forms and expressions of religions.

Since antiquity, religious groups and traditions have been not just a matter of fact but developed from the mental and conceptual worlds of individual actors or several believers. Consequently, the religiously self-determined life of individuals was self-evident: confessions, rituals, and practices as they were of great importance – even sociologically – on the institutional level of religious communities, determined and declared generally valid by religious functionaries, only had a secondary role for the individual believer who constructed his own religious self-concept from his affiliation with one or several communities.

For the individual, it was rather his own concepts and local traditions which were influential: religious thought and action of believing individuals corresponds only rudimentarily to the visible-institutionalised artefacts of religion. Across religious communities, the majority of religious people represent that multitude of individual forms of religious thought, action, and effect which exists within the religions and which cannot be homogenised institutionally.

Visible religion is like an iceberg – underneath the waterline, manifold forms of religious life are hidden which are equally pronounced in different religious communities.⁵³ (53) “The institutionalisation of religious action as religions is not the normal situation but the exception. And above all: it is only a tiny segment of lived religion. Many religious concepts and practices are shared by many people, independent of their religious affiliation. 'Interreligious dialogue' often only constructs the boundaries which it then wants to break down.”⁵⁴ The point today is, therefore, to envision that any postulated confessional unity or the individual assent of individuals to a religious community has always been intriguingly related to its intra-institutional plurality.

3.3 Diversity and Exclusive Claims to Interpretation: Effects of Globalisation and Individualisation on Religion

In an era of progressing globalisation and individualisation, the internal diversity of individual as well as collectively shared beliefs becomes ever more evident. The time of religious conformity has elapsed. An institutional gesture that would purport the conformity and homogeneity of its own religious community, postulating an exclusive prerogative of interpretation for the beliefs in question would not do justice to the societal realities of inter and intra-religious heterogeneity. Moreover, this gesture theologically contradicts the understanding of tradition as a living community of discourse and interpretation.

In contrast to this, a strong group bonding can be observed especially – but not exclusively – in diaspora situations which are rather influenced by groups which are oriented towards the observance of the right faith and right religious practice. These are constructed over dogmatic theologumena postulated to be the only true ones and partly put pressure on individual believers to adopt their own theological thought as well as practice. From the perspective of loved religion, confessional unity has basically never existed. Therefore, an intensive engagement with the pre-theological and pre-institutional experience of people is both inter and intra-religiously advisable.

Disregarding the different perspectives on confessional conformity of one's own religious community, it should apply today to all believers in late modernity that, in the era of the “Second Modernity” (Ulrich Beck e.a.), the pressure on traditions and values has increased. That is why a progressing de-confessionalisation and de-institutionalisation of religion is not very surprising. The likewise progressing marginalisation of primarily the great churches that is not to be overlooked is accompanied by a clear decrease of religious

⁵³ For late modernity, cf. Thomas Luckmann: *Die unsichtbare Religion*, Frankfurt a.M. 1991; Hubert Knoblauch: *Populäre Religion. Auf dem Weg in eine spirituelle Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt/New York 2009.

⁵⁴ Jörg Rüpke: *Religiöses Handeln jenseits von Religion*. In: *Welt und Umwelt der Bibel*, 1/2017, 71

socialisation, especially in schools.

At the same time, we experience an increasing polarisation of our societies and (international) communities locally and globally, caused by fundamentalism, populism, and radicalisation. Since, contrary to this trend, many young people today, in light of the increasing loss of orientation, ask for transcendence, the sacralisation of the I⁵⁵ becomes a religious signature of individualisation, and the interest in religious and spiritual questions on the whole is rising, it is about time for all religious communities to take notice of, elicit, and communicate theological potentials and to develop them into a pluralist religious pedagogy which is able to release peace potentials out of itself.

The interreligious-pluralist reflection of a shared “in-depth theology” (Abraham Joshua Heschel; cf also paragraph 1) by the religious communities also has significant ethical implications because it is able to promote peace between the religions through dialogue as a basis of a more peaceful world.⁵⁶

Even from a perspective of feminist theology, pluralist theology of religion meets with great interest: in view of wider gender justice, feminist theologians from different religions ask for the respective liberating elements in the religions which are to be discovered and strengthened.⁵⁷

4 Interreligious Theology and the Project of a Pluralist Religious Pedagogy

The approach represented here is based on a pluralist theology of religions as Perry Schmidt-Leukel et.al. brought into the discussion.⁵⁸

Pluralist theology of religion assumes that several religions (religious traditions) relate to the same divine transcendent-immanent, ultimate reality with an equal validity way and that they have the potential to orient human life towards this reality in a salutary way. In short: it assumes that the ways to salvation of the religions are equivalent.

Pluralist theology of religions does not claim that all religions experience the ultimate reality in the same way and that they all teach more or less the same. Rather, pluralist theology of religions assumes that the religions are based on different but equally valid experiences. However, religions are neither static nor homogeneous entities. They undergo continuous changes, and they have developed, within themselves, a great internal diversity. This mirrors, as it were, basic patterns of the interreligious diversity. Differences which we discern between religions can frequently be found, in an altered form, also as differences within the religions.

Moreover, all great religious traditions emerged from syncretic processes and even their further development and change has frequently been influenced by syncretist processes. Due to the interreligious diversity and

⁵⁵ Cf. Gerhard Wegener: *Religiöse Kommunikation und soziales Engagement. Die Zukunft des liberalen Paradigmas*, Leipzig 2016, 20 e.al.

⁵⁶ Cf. the impulses by Hans Küng: *Weltethos-Projekt*, Munich 1990.

⁵⁷ Cf. Carola Roloff et.al.: *Interreligiöser Dialog, Gender und dialogische Theologie* (cf. note 31)

⁵⁸ Paraphrase from the working paper for the interreligious project group (cf. impressum) “Grundlegende Fragen des Lebens (das “Elementare/Fundamentale”) aus der Sicht der Religionstheologie”.

intra-religious polymorphism of the religions, mutual enrichment and learning from one another is possible.

In this mutual learning process, it is not a question of completely grasping the ultimate reality and describing it correctly. Rather, in dialogue, representatives of religions could learn from each other new things about how the *relationship of the ultimate reality to the world* can be interpreted and what can be concluded from the belief in the existence of the ultimate reality for *our understanding of the world, of life in the world, and of the basic questions of human existence*.

From the perspective of pluralist theology of religions, such questions can be reflected in a shared discussion of the religions without wanting to demonstrate the superiority of one's own and the inferiority of the other religions in the process. It is a question of understanding the religious Other as they understand themselves, seeing the world – and oneself – through the eyes of the Other and to allow oneself to be challenged, inspired, and corrected by it.⁵⁹ The transformational dimension of dialogue comes about because, in this shared process, new supporting interpretations open up.

The following four basic principles of pluralist theology of religions also apply to a religious pedagogy which seeks dialogical-interreligious learning:

1. A hermeneutical leap of faith in the capability for the truth of other religions,
2. the epistemological principle of the unity of reality,
3. the discursive character of interreligious relationships, and
4. the development of an interreligious theology as an open-ended process.

A pluralist and dialogue-oriented religious pedagogy understands religious diversity as a foundation to be cherished which becomes manifest in openness and an appreciating attitude. It shares the position of a pluralist understanding of truth, deriving from it the insight that religions are dependent on shared dialogue in their efforts for a deepened understanding of reality. This dialogue complements, expands, and enriches one's own partial perspective through the perception of the respective other views.

From the insight into the connection of one's own claims to truth and salvation with one's perspective follows epistemic humility⁶⁰ and modesty⁶¹ when dealing with normative and truth-related questions – conscious of being dependent on the Other in the effort to understand reality.

The dialogical learning processes are undergone with the consciousness of taking part in a search process for supporting interpretations of life in a community of seekers. Concerning the religions that share the learning

⁵⁹ Cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel: *Wahrheit in Vielfalt* (see above note 7); on a dialogical theological theology, see also Katajun Amirpur et al. (eds.): *Perspektiven dialogischer Theologie. Offenheit der Religionen und eine Hermeneutik des interreligiösen Dialogs*. Munster/New York 20106.

⁶⁰ Cf. Klaus von Stosch: *Zur Möglichkeit und Unmöglichkeit des interreligiösen Dialogs. Untersuchungen im Anschluss an Catherine Cornille*. In: *Ethik und Gesellschaft 2/2011: Religionsprojektionen* (download http://ethik-und-gesellschaft.de/mm/EuG-2-2011_von_Stosch.pdf; accessed on 29-11-2019).

⁶¹ Cf. Thorsten Knauth: *Wahrheit aus der Perspektive dialogischer Religionspädagogik. Ein Plädoyer für Bescheidenheit*. In: *RpB Religionspädagogische Beiträge*, Heft 81/2019, 43-53.

process, the plurality-friendly motives of their traditions are reconstructed in the interest of religious pedagogy. Exclusive claims to salvation or motives directed towards demarcation are not masked out. They are, however, no longer given any absolute weight (power) – they are rather interpreted as subjectively bound positions of strengthening one's own. An interreligious, dialogical religious pedagogy works constructively with a plurality-friendly hermeneutic.

We take the effort for an appreciating understanding of other religions for a suitable response to the global societal challenges of our time. It opens a possibility for the religious communities to find adequate answers for them. The central dimension of a plurality-friendly approach is a hermeneutic of trust in the “religious Other”.

Dialogical cooperation begins and succeeds provided that the others' interpretations of reality contain substantial contributions to an understanding of reality. This assumes likewise that other perspectives are perceived by visualising positions that are connected with persons and their views. The personalisation of interpretive perspectives places religion-related knowledge into a mutual relationship.

One hermeneutic challenge consists of putting oneself into a personal relationship with these contributions with one's respective own interpretation of reality. The serious effort to perceive and understand the Other in their self-understanding through deep listening is a core element of a dialogical attitude which transcends differences in a “trans-difference” (Ephraim Meir). The concept of “trans-difference” does not negate the differences between the religions but sees a possibility not to understand them as separating but rooting them in a commonality which is reached through dialogue and mutual understanding. Here, the transformational significance becomes visible: the dialogical process transcends existing differences and opens new spaces of mutual understanding, thus changing the subject.

This dialogical hermeneutic of trust rooted in a *depth theology* and aiming at *trans-difference* is conducive both for the intra- and interreligious dialogue, for the corresponding encounters, and for the shares of the religious-pedagogical theory and practice in the approach of a *pluralist religious pedagogy*.

Constitutively connected with the subject- and dialogue-orientation is the multi-perspectivist design of the processes of learning and teaching that is to be shaped in an interreligious religious pedagogy. The appreciation of plurality excludes the absolutisation of one single perspective as the central view for exploring reality.

In the dialogical process, this subjective and inter-subjective perspective is to be transcended so that a “third space”⁶² for encounter is created in which a new understanding of reality can be developed. Interreligious, dialogical religious pedagogy shapes learning and teaching in the sense of a multi-topical space in which reality is interpreted from the perspectives of different places of perception and experience and related to each other in dialogue.⁶³

⁶² Cf. Homi Bhaba: *The Location of Culture*, Abingdon 1994.

⁶³ (63) Cf. Thorsten Knauth: *Dialogisches Lernen als zentrale Figur interreligiöser Kooperation?* In: Konstantin Lindner

5 Religion and Confession in the Context of the Project of a Pluralist Religious Pedagogy

Following from the previous discussions, there is the question of how a dialogue- and subject-oriented religious pedagogy in a pluralist perspective relates to the confessionality of Religious Education. The understanding of religion and confession in the context of a pluralist Religious Education focusses on the fundamental dynamics of questions and answers as they unfold in the framework of in-depth theology and can be implemented in the learning process in the classroom.

In the sense of a heuristic impulse, the following reflection starts with the four ideal-typical patterns which Detlef Pollack contributed to the discourse in a different context:

- religious routine (religious response without a religious question),
- vital religion (religious question and religious answer),
- pragmatism (no religious question, no religious answer), and
- seeking religion (religious question without a religious answer).⁶⁴

This subject-oriented approach meets the assumed educational approach in so far as it starts from questions of people – or students – and points out attitudes that a person can have towards religion or religiosity: the interaction of questions and answers as formulated in the aforementioned four ideal-typical forms marks different patterns of religious-ideological existence.

Religion as routine lives with religious answers, for example, through ritualised attendance of services or devotions without, however, being driven by a presently existential religious question.

Vital religion, in contrast, lives its religious answer in view of vital religious questions, for example, through experiencing religious rituals as practical life assistance in view of everyday problems and doubts.

These two forms of religion have in common that they are each focussing on transcendence by relating to a personal religious answer. Besides, they have in common that, with the answer, they each contain material shares of religion: whoever has integrated a religious answer into his concept of life, is also partly determined by material religious aspects of content.

Another ideal-typical pattern does without material references to a religion, that is, people with this pattern do not articulate their existential questions in an explicitly religious way.

The seeking form of religion, finally, is determined by the active search, in different world views and religious communities, of a suitable spirituality for the person in question.

et al. (eds.): *Zukunftsfähiger Religionsunterricht. Konfessionell – kooperativ – kontextuell*. Freiburg/Basel/Wien 2017, 193-212; cf. also Thorsten Knauth/Carola Roloff et al.: *Auf dem Weg zu einer dialogisch-interreligiösen Hermeneutik*. In: Katajun Amirpur et al.: *Perspektiven einer interreligiösen Theologie. Offenheit in den Religionen und eine Hermeneutik des interreligiösen Dialogs*. Munster/New York 2016, 207-326, esp. 299-316.

⁶⁴ Detlef Pollack: *Was ist Religion. Versuch einer Definition*. In: id.: *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland*, Tübingen 2003, 28-55 (beforehand *ZfR* 3 (1995), 163-190).

Moreover, the interaction of questions and answers indicates that all students in a study group, notwithstanding their religious socialisation and their religious and ideological affiliation, can locate themselves within this range staked out by these ideal-typical forms without necessarily sharp demarcation lines. The heuristic value of this model can also be seen in the fact that the interspaces can be illuminated.

Pedagogically, this means that a hasty allocation of the students – by the teachers as well as by the students themselves – to a particular religious community is no longer necessary. Rather, trans-religious allocations and groupings of attitudes towards religion and religiosity emerge independent of the content-related attitudes of the individual students but are perceived and preserved in the heterogeneity of the study group. Moreover, understanding religion from the question-answer interaction contains a high didactic potential: thus it can happen in Religious Education that the religiously “routined” one is disturbed in his routine by a question of a “vital” one through an impulse from the side of the teacher or through a comment by a fellow student, for example, by becoming conscious of his unquestioned routine of weekly attendance of synagogue/church service/Friday prayer and, triggered by the question, reflects his religiosity, integrates the received impulses into his life, and becomes religiously vital himself. Likewise, however, the religiously “routined” one could be challenged in his religious answer by being questioned by the religiously “pragmatic” one so that he questions his answer and modifies it if necessary. But on the other hand, the religiously “vital” could answer the life question of the religious “seeker” - or also that of the religious “pragmatic” through his religious answer, thus vitalising their religion.

In the following, the question-answer pairs are to be identified more clearly: notwithstanding the concrete religions, a religious question is to be understood as the fact that people see their lives as questioned, in the truest sense, through experiences of transcendence or other incidents.

These questions are religious, firstly, in so far as experiences are concerned here which point beyond the concrete situation, or also touch on fundamental questions of one's own existence, unsettling previous certainties. In such a situation of questioning a previous world view, the perception can be opened for that we described as *depth* in chapter 1, and it may come to an experience of being indeterminately addressed through something that can be described theologically and religion-sociologically with the term transcendence. This experience of being addressed can be described as an experience of resonance. The subject is touched and responds to being addressed with being touched.⁶⁵ By being addressed, the subject transcends the situation and refines the time that was experienced in such an intensive way as far as such experiences are preserved more permanently. Experiences of resonance open up the perception for the depth of being human (the “depth” as a metaphor for the horizon of transcendence), touching upon depth-theological questions which continuously accompany human beings.

Secondly, the interaction of questions and answers is religious in so far as it is a matter of questions in the

⁶⁵ Cf. Hartmut Rosa: *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung*, Frankfurt a.M. 2016

sense of Heschel's "depth theology"⁶⁶ which reflect the fundamental questions of humans as such, trying to find answers. The relevance of religion for humans is manifested in the respective concrete and specific answers of the individual religions to fundamental questions. This means the elemental, irreducible questions of the desires and yearnings, the fears and anxieties, the distresses and joys, the hopes as well as human abysses which move and determine people's feelings and thoughts beyond a superficial everydayness. This should, however, not tear apart everyday life and transcendence like separate spaces (as in the scheme of "sacred" - "profane") but differentiated as dimensions of the one reality.

With Henning Luther, religion as "Weltabstand" (distance from the world)⁶⁷ may then describe the dimension of immanent experiences. Everyday life becomes translucent, transparent for this depth of life. This moment of experience remains unavailable in principle.⁶⁸

Likewise, is the elementary, material answers of the individual religions, expressed in the linguistic mode of truthfulness, which can influence and determine people's thought and feelings beyond the present time. Here, the material contents of Religion come into play, not as normative statutes in a dogmatic way of thinking and speaking, however, but as existential interpretations and interpretaments of precisely those dogmas and traditions from the respective religions. Thus, that which the dogmas originally wanted and were supposed to be, comes to the forefront again – a replica on in-depth theological questions. Here, Heschel speaks of the fact that theological speech must become "pre-theological"⁶⁹ again in order to gain or be given relevance. Religious pedagogy opens this orienting potential of religious doctrines and behaviours by leading these statements back, as it were, to their pre-theological content, exposing their existence-related question.

Understanding religion in this sense as an interpretation system of life has the following consequence for the design and orientation of a corresponding Religious Education: it is not primarily a matter of transmitting material dogmas of faith or rehearsing Jewish, Christian, or Muslim traditions as such. The concern rather is that the students recognise for themselves, reflect, and, as the case may be, even experience the relevance of the topic of religion/spirituality/world view the religious diversity and simultaneously in the existential power of orientation for their lives in the encounter in Religious Education. Here, Religion is a system of orientation which opens, in educational processes, interpretaments for an interpretation of life that is relevant for them – for example, when they meet something contingent and areligious interpretation points beyond the only superficial everyday life, offering help to cope with, for example, a crisis.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Cf. Abraham Heschel: Erneuerung des Protestantismus (see note 143).

⁶⁷ Cf. Henning Luther: Religion und Alltag. Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts, Stuttgart 1992, 22-29.

⁶⁸ Wherever this is claimed or demanded differently, this is to be resisted with Tillich's (cross-religious) "protestant principle" so that religion does not degenerate into ideology and idolatry (cf. Henning Luther note 67). On the "protestant principle", cf. Bernd Beuscher/Dietrich Zilleßen: Profanität und Religion. Entwurf einer profanen Religionspädagogik, Weinheim 1998.

⁶⁹ Cf. Abraham J. Heschel: Tiefentheologie. In: id. Die ungesicherte Freiheit. Essays zur menschlichen Existenz. Neukirchen/Vllyn 1985, 97-105.

⁷⁰ Here, the heavenly becomes tangible and can be experienced in the daily, the infinite in the finite. Thus, in the sense of Schleiermacher, life in its respective contexts becomes the place in which religious education for young people happens.

The reflection of the concept of religion is followed by the question of the self-understanding and claim of one's own religion – primarily with regard to Religious Education within religious plurality. Then the question arises in how far normative truth claims in Religious Education can function as a basis for the answers or further questions to the students' “depth theological” questions if each religion is understood as one of several interpretive patterns with regard to the questions. There lies a great interreligious task in reflecting and clarifying one's self-understanding as a religious community, especially for developing a pluralist religious pedagogy.

If Religious Education wants to offer horizons of orientation for one's elemental questions of life, then it cannot be conceptualised and designed as purely in the way of Religious Studies. It must then be understood as *confessional* in the sense of *positional*, both for teachers and for students. Considering the pluriform appearance of confession which is always subjective because it has been adopted by subjects by interpretive processes, we also speak of a confessory character of Religious Education. Even the term *positionality* is to be preferred from confessionality because the term confession is institutionally charged and could be received ambiguously in the school system. However, it is theologically important in the sense of public understanding and pedagogically indispensable as will be substantiated in the following:

1. Confession as Reflected Positionality

No topic of teaching practice (especially not in the context of religious themes) is presented without a position.⁷¹ The formation of the teachers through the study of theology the contents of which are taught in the partial responsibility of the respective religious community as well as through the religious-didactical training as well as their own positioning concerning what is offered there will feed into their didactic arrangement. The shared responsibility for the syllabus and its implementation in the internal curricula of the school is a further factor. In so far, Religious Education is “confessional” from the requirement of responsibility. It is necessary to take a reflected position on this. The Religious Education teacher can be an exemplary *role model* for presenting the origins of positions in a reflected way (i.e. also concerning his or her own preconditions).

2. Confession as a Relative and Relational Positionality

Not only is confession something relative in principle because we can only just point to the always greater horizon of transcendence which we describe with the word God but we can never catch it; and not only is that relative which religious communities define as confession because it is historical and changes and also must change. Rather, a confessional position in a plural society is always to be perceived as relative besides many others and to be related to them dialogically. In terms of didactics, this means that contributed positions are to be treated dialogically, i.e., the relativity of positions, as relationality in interaction and the discussion with other positions, is to be tested concerning their conditions and the scope of their plausibility and to be related to each other.

⁷¹ Cf. Jürgen Habermas: *Erkenntnis und Interesse*. Frankfurt a.M. 1968

Especially in the phase of adolescence, this is the required way of handling positions which can and must develop through experiment, trial, questioning etc. But it also remains an important condition due to the questionability of each position in matters of religion. This “play” needs to be performed competently by those who have the didactic responsibility and requires not only the insight into the general relativity of positions but also the theological as well as the didactic pleasure to take up positions other than one's own or the known one by way of trial. Thus, it needs a plural confessional responsibility for a “trans-confessional didactic”.⁷² Here, the RE teacher is an exemplary role model for rehearsing positionality as something relative and relational, which may also mean that one's own contribution can be laced with limitations, making it didactically necessary to include partners who can, (in a cognitive and performative way) contribute positions from their own background. This applies the more for the next aspect.

3. Confession as an Authentic Positionality

The elemental questions which become topics in Religious Education are to be examined for their positionality and perspectivity (for example, it is impossible to treat the question of theodicy “neutrally”). Here, the teacher is challenged to disclose his or her existentially relevant position selectively. Then, the RE teacher is an exemplar *role model* for an authentic positionality. The *fiducia* (the trusting devotion and the confessed attitude of life), however, is – strictly speaking – no teaching aim (those are rather *notitia* – perception – and *assensus/dissensus* – interpretation, dialogue, judgement -), however, it cannot be excluded from the discursive event of teaching in the “subject area” of religion in the sense of an authentic positionality in any meaningful way.

For the confessional communities answering for Religious Education, this means that they must take into account that aspects of an authentic positionality may become a topic in teaching (and those who are trained by them should be competent in dealing with them). But personal confessions can be expected as little as *fiducia* rehearsed in the school system. For this purpose, there are other spaces for the religious community the potentials of which may come into the horizon in class, for example when designing the interface between the school and the community (church, mosque, synagogue) or in the optional offer of spiritual school culture.

A religious community can fulfil this educational responsibility and observe its positionality in a meaningful way only together with other religious communities and those who contribute to the approach to the world in the school system. In this process, religious communities reflect and reinterpret their own principles – even concerning mutual compatibility with the principles of other religious communities⁷³ – so that the concept of a pluralist religious pedagogy moves within the framework of art. 7,3 of the Basic Law.

⁷² About this term, cf. Michael Meyer-Blanck: Konfessionslosigkeit und die konfessorische Dimension des Religionsunterrichts. In: ZPT 66 (2014), 215-223, here esp. 222.

⁷³ Even for the wide model of an interreligious cooperation in the subject Religious Education, an assessment on the so-called Hamburg Way currently confirms the compatibility with art. 7,3 of the Basic Law; cf. Hinnerk Wißmann: Religionsunterricht für alle? Zum Beitrag des Religionsverfassungsrechts für die pluralistische Gesellschaft, Tübingen 2019.

6. Theological and Religious-Pedagogical Challenges

A peaceful world requires a fundamental mutual trust between people even with different religious affiliations. When developing a pluralist religious pedagogy, different steps and ways are to be taken in theology as well as religious pedagogy which wants to make their own contributions to a peaceful global community.

* Theologically, it is (1.), in a wide horizon as described above in the chapters 2 to 5, a question of religions coming to a mutual understanding approaches and guidelines of a pluralist theology of religions, uncovering them within the sources and traditions of their religions, sharing them with each other, and cooperating further on conceptual foundations for a pluralist theology of religions or communicate about their basics. Therefore it is (2.) theologically necessary to identify the claims to absoluteness of the religions involved in a constructive and appreciating cooperation out of each their own tradition, to evaluate them critically from the sources of the holy scriptures, and to rephrase them regarding a culture of recognition for dialogue and for the context of a pluralist theology. Only an unrestricted and unreserved mutual recognition of theological claims in other religions opens a basis on which representations of religions can have an honest and open discourse to cooperatively formulate a pluralist religious pedagogy theoretically and then implement it didactically.

Therefore, it will (3.) also be a question of perceiving all normatively formulated claims as only subjective certainties of individuals and to note them as such in order to, against this background, problematise the normative claim attitudes of institutionalised religious communities as preventing dialogue (in this sense, claims to absoluteness are to be relativised). This – from a pluralist perspective constitutive – rating of normative claim attitudes are to be included into the individual religious communities in an open discourse and to be justified to reach an as great as possible plausibility for them as a basis for a pluralist religious pedagogy.

In religious pedagogy, it is (4.) likewise a question of taking constructive steps to design the theory of a workable pluralist religious pedagogy.

* In religious pedagogy, one task is to check, within each religion, how the respective other religions were thematised in religious-pedagogical contexts (e.g in school textbooks) and if these presentations take interreligious as well as pluralist aspects. As the case may be, these aspects are to be identified more clearly.

* In religious pedagogy, it is, moreover, important to reflect the pluralist-theological consensus (see above) from a didactic and religious-pedagogical angle to draft perspectives for a pluralist religious pedagogy (and to communicate it in the religious communities).

* Thus, practice-oriented teaching-studying units and materials are to be developed besides the theoretical

work to demonstrate what a future religious education as pluralist religious pedagogy in the responsibility of many religious communities can look like.

* The considerations on a pluralist religious pedagogy presented here do not imply any definition of a specific model of teaching Religious Education. But religious-pedagogically it is of central importance to have a discussion about educational possibilities and forms of organisation of a dialogue-orientated education from the perspective and on the basis of pluralist and dialogue-oriented religious pedagogy and to support practical approaches of dialogical interreligious learning through research, development of material, and the academic training and further education of teachers.