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Transcendence and freedom: on the anthropological and cultural centrality of religion

The fact that rigorous philosophical thinking is not possible without reference to transcendence, as it is also expressed in the notion of God, was already instilled in platonic and neo-platonic antiquity, which emphasised the dependence of human thought on transcendence. Defenders of religion in modernity have called to mind these references to transcendence with respect to the systematic of human thinking in a move counter to the modern critique of religion, and have concentrated on the definition and clarification of a *concept* of religion. In the German Enlightenment, the critique of religion was therefore not committed to its dismissal but rather the self-illumination of the status of religion, much differently than in France, where a radical critique of religion was brought forward by the circle around the *Encyclopédistes* and Voltaire, or in England by David Hume.¹ These differences make it clear that religion need not fall victim to Enlightenment critiques,² as the so-called ‘New Atheists’ maintain today by means of old arguments.³

On the contrary, the conceptual clarification of religion can itself also prove to be a critical undertaking, namely, by permeating religio-theoretical aspects of

1 Karl Gabriel has recently shown that the formation of the relationship of the theology of the Reformation to the Enlightenment is due to the special relationship between the state and religion, or religious communities in Germany, which – differently than in French Catholicism and in southern Europe as we have said – did not behave in a reactionary and hostile manner towards reason, but rather fostered a constructive relationship between faith and reason. A connection of this kind can enable an entirely different relationship between religion and the public realm, or between religion, the law and the state than in the anti-religious atmosphere of secular France (cf. Gabriel, Gärtner, Pollack 2012).

2 As such, describing the Enlightenment as a constitutive process of secularisation does not correspond in any way to the image of the epoch, but rather proves to be a projection backwards from the crises of the 20th century. Ulrich Barth expresses succinctly the misunderstanding with respect to the relationships of Enlightenment and the critique of religion (cf. Barth 2009).

3 It is the religious-critical voices of Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, which are found again today, nearly unchanged in, ‘New Atheism’ in its various forms. Although according to their genetic reduction, religion had already reduced to an epiphenomenon, the return of such theorems are being celebrated today in the neuro-biological and motivation-theoretical levelling of religion (cf. Boyer 2004; Schmidt-Salomon 2006; Dawkins 2006; see also the critical response to Dawkins by McGrath 2004; Harris 2007; Dennett 2008).

life with reflection. Further, belonging to the conceptual clarification of religion is the task of making clear its relation to the other remaining aspects of existence. It is in this connection between religion and existence in its subjective and intersubjective associations that one of the culturally central roles of religion becomes manifest.

Approached categorially, two spheres which, previously unseparated, yet have been in the process of separation from one another since the onset of modernity, must therefore be differentiated for the clarification of the concept of religion. These are the anthropological sphere, which encompasses the sociological and biological dimensions, and the sphere of metaphysics or transcendental philosophy. Consequently, it is not appropriate to consider one of these spheres without also taking the other into account respectively. This is because the question of religion raises the question of the whole, the question of unity. However, after the metaphysical turn in modernity this question no longer relates directly to being (*Sein*). On the contrary, it is focused on its mental visualisation. It is precisely at this point that religion asserts its ontological and metaphysical critical capacities. This, however, does not make the object of metaphysics superfluous. Rather – on the mental level – the ontologically and metaphysically determinative questions are repeated. They remain present on the level of theoretical consciousness, which is oriented directly towards a ground which grounds the whole, and which first makes it possible to assume a systematic nexus of thought. This connection presupposes an interrelationship between being and reason, and safeguards reality as a result. The treatment of religion by sociology and evolutionary biology – that is, on the anthropological level – does not have these relationships in view, but it likewise does not remain untouched by them. Sociology and evolutionary biology are right to fight back against a pre-critical re-ontologisation. But their rejection of these ontological and metaphysical connections does not necessarily lead to a rejection of reality and normativity. They can be present in the guise of the relational aspects of consciousness as entailed in the theory of freedom, that is, in the guise of the practical processes of implementation and interpretation.

Following Kant, and interacting with Kant's criticism, the representatives of German idealism such as Fichte, Hegel and Schelling in particular, have felt obligated to this task, but so have especially Schleiermacher, Hölderlin and Kierkegaard. In connection to the theologian Schleiermacher, I would like to turn to the question of what meaning and function is befitting a notion of transcendence for thinking and acting, how this relation to transcendence is put together and how it comes to be in this relation to reflexive subjectivity on the one hand and, on the other hand, to the self-established irretrievability (*Nichteinholbarkeit*) of this relation. We shall see that it is precisely the individual in its singularity,

which in its indefensibility and opacity stands for the irretrievability corresponding to transcendence.

The proposition that transcendence serves as an epistemological and action-theoretical function of the concept of religion will be unfolded in three steps. *Firstly*, I will determine the challenge of religion in its contemporary situation. Its presence, not only sociologically, in the so-called ‘return of religion’, but rather more precisely in the philosophical striving for a ‘New Realism’ (cf. Gabriel 2013; 2014; Ferraris 2014) just as with a ‘New Atheism’,⁴ gives occasion for assuming there is sustained interest in a point of access to reality, which means, in fact, that the question of reality, i.e. of validity and normativity, has not been suspended. This being the case, however, structurally presupposes the previously mentioned reference to transcendence for holding onto reality, respectively identity and normativity. Therefore, I want, *secondly*, to turn to the protagonist who was concerned with the topic of religion in precisely this way, namely, to Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher. I will do so through his recourse to Kant, for in this Schleiermacher, in critical interaction with Kant, attended to the work of providing a conceptual clarification of religion or transcendence in a similarly metaphysical-critical manner. To the extent that he continued the modern program along Kant’s line – though with critical distance – he can provide inspiration for the contemporary debates on the recovery of reality and validity. The contemporary relevance of this question does not, in the last instance, arise from the fact it can be shown that transcendence, which for Schleiermacher is what religion stands for, need not be tied absolutely to explicit forms of religion, but rather that it can also be tied to implicit aspects of transcendence in other phenomena in life. In a *third* section, it will consequently be shown that a critical concept of religion that is open to a variety of phenomena can have emancipative potential coming to bear precisely on those relations accompanying subjectivity and rationality which can be characterised as representing that which is unfulfilled and unattainable. This presupposes that the human being remains thematically oriented, and therefore as such, to the understanding (*Verstehen*) of reality, that is, oriented to the relationships between the world and itself in an unobstructed way.

⁴ This is because there are even traces of a ‘return of religion’ in this field, for example in Dworkin 2014.

This shifts the hermeneutical connection of experience and understanding into a kind of view wherein its focus on interpretation (*Deutung*) cannot determine reality universally, but only to the extent that it holds onto it and the validities that spring out of it symbolically. The effective power of the interrogation of the emancipatory power of religiously determined individuality will be measured by the extent to which it is successful in asserting its symbolically determined connection to transcendence in accordance with theoretical approaches to rationality and freedom, without, however, thereby wiping out its existing ties to transcendence. The meaning of religion for individuality and vice versa might culminate in the fact that in the consolidation of the religious as such, it shows itself to be the symbol of the specific character of irretrievable singularity according to its form, which thus turns out to be compatible with modernity. Consolidated in the symbol, religion then encounters individual self-assurance with universal purpose as a space for resonance. This possibility of the place and significance of the individual in its religious character is to be portrayed in reference to the development running from Kant to Schleiermacher.

1 The new inquiry about being and its lost ground: religion and the problem of its conceptual clarification in modernity

It was not with Luhmann, but rather with Kant, that it first belonged to the concept of religion to become its own object in its special clarification beyond the traditional trappings. That is, both the critique and the affirmation of religion go hand in hand. It was indeed the case that the critique of religion, being expressed concurrently with the assertion of the natural scientific worldview of classical mechanics and the positive understanding of the sciences upon which it was built, that concealed this shared bond between the critique and affirmation of religion. The transcendental aspect of consciousness, which belonged to Enlightenment criticism, was pushed to the background, prepared not least by the anthropological turn, which was then perceived solely in sociological and evolutionary biological ways and not received in a philosophical manner with regard to its consequences for the theory of religion. This positivistic paradigm shift in the self-understanding of all the sciences, oriented towards the natural sciences as it was, then radiated onto society, not only distorting insights about religious matters in the process but also things taken for granted in philoso-

phy. Whatever was to be accepted as *clare et distincte* would need to prove itself before the tribunal of a natural-scientific (or, alternatively, a logical) positivism. Religion therefore came under pressure for legitimacy in two respects. It had to maintain its claim, not only before the tribunal of reason, but also in contrast to empirical-positivistic thinking. The danger of mixing world view and science goes hand in hand with this double and yet asymmetrical demand,⁵ which can potentially yield fundamentalist consequences on both sides. A conceptual clarification of religion which remains obliged to the critical enterprise of modernity will endeavour to uncover such mixtures and dissemblances (along with attempting to clarify religion in its tension between affirmation and critique), as well as being able to clarify both its critique and its affirmation in an appropriate manner. This critical-affirmative clarification of religion also has consequences for the understanding of reality and validity.

Religion signals its claim to reality in its being-out-for (*Aussein*) the whole. With respect to the question of the place of religion in the light of reason, the questions raised at the beginning about the 'New Atheism' and the 'New Realism' therefore carry some importance, albeit they are explicitly concerned with questions revolving around the understanding of reality. In this regard, it is necessary to pay attention to two things in a conceptual clarification of religion: on the one hand, that it takes the empirical-critical challenge to religion into account, but on the other hand, that this process of clarification preserves a reference to the continuing importance of the transcendental for retaining reality and validity. Neither descriptions from cultural anthropology and the sociology of religion are sufficient for this, nor is a return to speculation. The practical claim of religion is only satisfied when the leading determinative criteria are neither exclusively of an empirical nature nor of a solely speculative one, but rather when theoretically grounded procedures on the conceptual level are applied, as would be formulated in the modern-critical understanding of religion. It is for this reason that the practical claim retains its fundamental significance in modernity, now conveying what was previously allocated to the metaphysical dimension. The practical task upholds the claim to reality as well as the claim of normative rules, thus avoiding becoming lost in subjective or merely individualistic questions of taste or expressions of certainty. A post-traditional and postmodern society could manage quite well with something like this, albeit a social arrangement of this kind would

⁵ There is no question about whether empiricism is methodologically justified in science, however, the fact that this only represents a subdomain of our understanding of reality should not be concealed. If this distinction is not retained by the counterpart, but on the grounds of empirical thinking instead, then this task vanishes all too quickly in a dismissal of the notion of transcendence from the area of science.

not do justice to the theoretical standards of the modern study of religion, nor would the actual importance of religion for the individual and social way of life (*Lebensführung*) on the one hand and the profiling of categorical thinking on the other hand come into view. The importance of religion actually hangs on its reaching out to the individual towards the transcendental nexus which guarantees reality and normative validity. This far-reaching effect is noticeable in various spheres which have emancipated themselves from explicit religion in the sense of a specific sphere – such as in art, but not only there; its effect is also felt in the economic and political sphere, in science or sport. The variety of expressions of religion which arise from this, even in its concealed form, should also be considered.⁶

Additional difficulties with the definition of religion emerge from this, since religion, or respectively, everything that is permeated by religion, is itself diffuse in these phenomena and developments. It is necessary to reckon with fuzzy, transitional and interim religious phenomena. At this point, with respect to the study of religion, it is necessary to consider ‘invisible’ religiosity (cf. Luckmann 1991), as it has been defined by Thomas Luckmann, or even wandering religiosity, or the so-called phenomena of an ‘affinity for religion’ (cf. Osthöven 2015, 358–77). Only in considering this multifacetedness, does it become apparent, in its full sharpness, that the efficacy of a conceptual clarification of religion matters for questions of normative character. This comes to the fore especially when the varying potentialities for marking distance and difference, which have constructed themselves in the field of religion during modernity, are perceived as potentialities from which claims to reality and normativity are fed.

In this distance to religion, which, in being distant, is equally indebted to the religious sphere or to transcendence respectively, the increasing complexity of religion consequently becomes apparent, which for its part must be embraced conceptually. This occurs in that, this insight into the indispensability of transcendence in both forms, i.e. of the critique as well as the affirmation of religion, is evidenced in various ways. Consequently, it is the aspect of transcendence that is found in the individual which suggests itself to be an instrument available for the clarification of the function of the religious beyond its explicit religious forms.

⁶ Nevertheless, philosophers like Herbert Schnädelbach, however, rightly resist rash usurpations, which are undertaken during the course of the clarification of religion as an anthropological constant. Not all vital questions are religious ones and not all interpretations of meaning are drawn from or rooted in transcendence. This must be clearly labelled, precisely in order not to jeopardise the prerogative of religious questioning (cf. Schnädelbach 2009, 3).

2 The function of religion as a clarification of the transcendently grounded individuality of humanity, with particular consideration of Schleiermacher in connection to Kant

Schleiermacher's theory of religion can be conceived as a continuation of Kant's critical enterprise. He wants to continue systematically the limits on thinking about the ground with respect to the conditions for thought posed by Kant. It is in the network of tension between criticism on the one hand and the emphasis on transcendence on the other that religion has its systematic place. The inheritance of Kant's liberating critique and the liberal achievements of enlightenment and secularism demonstrate themselves at this point – as we shall see – in connection with religion and freedom.

2.1 Kant

Kant did not fight his battle with dogmatism only to oppose it with vain subtleties (Kant 1799, 876 [AA XII, 360]). He stood in service of the Enlightenment, in service of reason and of understanding, and especially in service of freedom, the freedom of thought, the freedom of action and the freedom of the word. In accordance with human dignity, emancipation and maturity are for the attainment of sovereignty, opposing both immaturity and authoritarianism as well as opportunism and cowardice. A pre-requisite for this was, however, that freedom and maturity could be arrived at by means of thought, because this alone serves for assessing the reason being used. Its arrival at the limits of pure reason ought not therefore result in an explaining away of religion – as is sometimes alleged – but rather in designating its location within the framework of his critique of reason. A conceptual clarification of religion, on the contrary, is also for Kant, one of the leading requirements of reason. But it is not directly graspable and communicable on the level of reason, and is therefore to be seen as falling within the limits of reason. The limits themselves are, however, likewise a mark of the theoretical standards of a conceptual approach to religion and as such ought not be disregarded. They have a precisely determined place which for reason itself is not an arbitrary one, but rather one which remains significant for the question of the foundational and orientating function of thinking and acting.

Kant posited the issue of the meaning of transcendence without running through it argumentatively, but rather by programmatically dismissing such

argumentation altogether. This is where the notion of ‘reverence for the moral law’, which he developed in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, finds its conceptual home. Kant presupposes the religious dignity of humanity, which, being veiled within human morality, appears in every act of respect for the moral law. This feeling of respect refers humanity to the transcendent foundations of freedom, or more aptly, to its being grounded in a ground. Being transcendent, this ground is therefore not something that one can directly experience or communicate, but rather access only indirectly along the way of experience of this respect. In this moment of reverence for the moral law, freedom runs up against its own limits, which show themselves to be bound to something transcendent. In this experience of reverence, the humanity of the human being becomes apparent, which in Kant’s understanding is attributed and promised to it through the humanity in human beings. Kant therefore saw human dignity for its part as something inherently bestowed to humanity and not something which humanity itself can produce, not even via processes of recognition. Demonstrating this dignity in a gracious manner, being able to provide its expression in being as well as in thought, encapsulates the meaning of the question of enlightenment and maturity, of human rationality and freedom.

Kant therefore knew something about the meaning of humanity’s consciousness of transcendence. When Kant takes reverence into account for the moral law, as well as the need to develop ideas that give thinking its guidelines, this points precisely to the transcendent fundament of human being, which is only accorded in experience and encounter.⁷ This is the point where the proponents of German idealism, by critical engagement with Kant, sought to move beyond him. Recourse to the subjectivity of reflection plays a role in this endeavour in various ways. In the following, this will be unpacked with reference to Schleiermacher whose aggravation with Kant’s criticism consists of focusing on the individual with respect to its experience of transcendence. This secures for him an indication of reality and validity as a religious experience and thus can take over the function of providing orientation for thinking and action. In Fichte’s ‘Philosophy of the Ego’ the subjectivity of reflection is exalted as the hermeneutical anchor point in the status of ultimate justification; while in Schleiermacher it carries similar importance, it is differentiated by a relativising critical function opposite thought and its competence for argumentation. The sum of his intention to carry on with Kant’s criticism does not consist in closing the hole in the foundation

⁷ He ultimately took account of this dimension in his critique of pure reason, which is to include not only the theoretical, but also the practical reason and the power of judgment, and not least of all in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (cf. Heidegger 1963, 14).

of the modern critique of metaphysics, but rather to strengthen its justification, albeit with the consequence – and this is what distinguishes him from Kant, just as much as from other representatives like Fichte and Hegel – of making this justification plausible. At this point the individual person plays an indispensable role, since this establishment of plausibility cannot conceptually bypass every individual's experience, or more precisely, every experience of transcendence.

2.2 Schleiermacher

Schleiermacher stands at the beginning of reflection on the theoretical clarification of religion, which he developed in critical interaction with Kant's critiques. These appeared to him, however, not only to be rudimentary, but also somewhat misguided. It was this deficit that he sought to address in his early writing on religion. Even though Kant was aware of the epistemological significance of religion, Schleiermacher nonetheless goes beyond him on this point (cf. Barth 2004, 272–5). His difference with Kant becomes apparent in that Schleiermacher understands religion to be foundational for morality. This is because, for Schleiermacher, there is no pure reason, no knowledge without presuppositions. Rather, knowledge and reason are always bound up with social and historical conditions. Without taking into account the 'need for reason' and without heeding the 'respect for the moral law', he became aware, by considering the individual's experience of religion, of the residuum of a ground and the need for grasping the whole. These subsequently become guiding aspects for thinking and action.

By means of religion, Schleiermacher points towards that which is always already given to and not retrievable from consciousness, but which also cannot be excluded from it. Whereas Kant only diagnosed and postulated the achievements of the theoretical and practical reason in view of the limits of its impact on thinking and action, Schleiermacher, with his deliberations on the theory of religion as such, fully and thoroughly explores the limits of this conceptual sphere in its function for thinking and action. The possibility for doing this arises from his knowledge of the religious consciousness as that which concurrently positions all action and thought processes alike.

These connections between religion and other aspects in an individual's daily conduct of thought and action mark the anthropological turn of religion. But this should not be misunderstood with respect to Schleiermacher in the sense of a biologizing attempt to explain away religion. The turn to anthropology rather, marks Schleiermacher's turning to focus on the attempt to theorise about consciousness and the individual. In this vein, he holds in his 'Second Speech: On the Essence of Religion' (Schleiermacher 2001, 74–115; ET: Schleiermacher 2014,

18–54) that religion represents its own province in the mental and spiritual faculties of humanity (*Gemüt*). As such, religion is identified indeed as a distinct area not dependent on knowledge and morality which, albeit appears in the individual, it never does so in and for itself, but rather always in connection with knowledge and morality, and as that which actually grounds both (cf. Schleiermacher 2001, 79–87).⁸

The salient point of Schleiermacher's theory of religion will therefore be misunderstood when its affinity to and its critique of Kant's critical enterprise are not taken into equal account (cf. Barth 2004). It is not a subsequent conclusion about reverence for the moral law as it is with Kant, for this would be secondary for Schleiermacher. A provisional intention prevented Schleiermacher from dismissing the absolute and the unfulfilled which are thematised in concert with religion. The absolute is postulated by Kant by means of the theory of reason with ideas and postulates – even if in a hiatus opposite theoretical apprehension. This kind of absolute is not postulated by Schleiermacher, rather it emerges as a dimension guiding knowledge and action in its effect in precisely this feeling or in immediate self-consciousness. This notion, or both notions respectively represent religion for Schleiermacher. It is the ineluctable and irretrievable entity of the individual, located in the immediate self-consciousness. In this it demonstrates a degree of sovereignty which affords a constructive-critical engagement with thought and action.

The position of religion will therefore be misunderstood if it is identified either with knowledge or morality, or if knowledge and morality as independent of religious consciousness are understood as the pre-determined conditions of all perception. In this way, the possibility of subsuming religion into knowledge and morality in the sense of traditional metaphysics is ruled out. According to Schleiermacher, such a metaphysics is obsolete and can be seen as superstitious, and such an ethics, corresponding to this, rightly falls victim to being judged as mere unsophisticated and uncritical conformism. If, however, these connections were simply to be dismissed, then bare relativity and arbitrariness would find their way into thinking. On the other hand, if with Schleiermacher, the religious consciousness is envisaged as leading action and thought, this has normative consequences. In this case, it is not possible to prohibit the operations of consciousness in their reaching out towards the goal and intended purpose in service

⁸ At this point it was clear to him that the thesis about the foundational function of religion for knowledge and morality would be met with resistance to the extent that he challenged the self-understanding of every theoretical and practical science, of the natural sciences just as much as that of economics and philosophy – and even that of conceptual metaphysics (cf. Schleiermacher 2001, 57–73; ET: Schleiermacher 2014, 3–17).

of the rejection of metaphysics and the recognition of scientific capacities. On the contrary, its analysis on the level of action and its reflective apprehension on the level of thinking belong to the self-transparency of the sciences. Schleiermacher is committed to precisely this kind of analysis of the implications of the religious conscious presented in this way.

This consolidation and validation of religion does not lead Schleiermacher in any way – as many allege – to a dismissal of Kant's concerns, but rather to a specification, say, with regard to the concept of the transcendental. To the extent that he takes on these fundamental epistemological concepts from Kant, Schleiermacher entirely shares in Kant's basic epistemological orientation. This means he maintains that presuppositions of knowing are not only to be found in empirical, social and historical conditions, but also that these are subject to categorical presuppositions. However, Schleiermacher takes this approach further. He makes recourse in an even more basic manner to the conditions of the presuppositions of what Kant designates as the *a priori* transcendental determination of thinking. He sees these presuppositions – contradictory as this may seem – as being bound to experiences, that is to ungraspable experiences, namely, to the 'Whence' of absolute dependence (cf. Schleiermacher 2003, 32–40 [§4]; ET: Schleiermacher 2011, 12–9 [§4]). Thus, in his thought, God is situated in the ground (of experience) instead of being postulated. An *a priori* attached to experience actually represents a square circle, but one which rests on a different concept of empiricism. What is decisive at this point is the distinction in the concept of experience. Experiences clarified in this way are not to be confused with observable empiricism; on the contrary, they ought rather to correspond – even in their irretrievability – to the Kantian *a priori*, which for Kant precedes empirical and rational clarifications. This is precisely what is made possible by the special formation of the individual in whom the immediate impressions of such experience, themselves not accessible to empirical experience, are being called forth. This is how the individual in Schleiermacher's thought advances into the categorical horizon of the determination of validity.

The clarification of the concept of individual thereby changes the weight of Kant's transcendental theory. The character of the transcendental changes as the feeling of religious experience generated in the individual becomes the focal point; it transcends the dichotomy between *a priori* and *a posteriori* via pre-empirical, as it were, categorical 'atmospheres', which for Schleiermacher are consolidated in religious feeling, that is, in immediate self-consciousness. These 'atmospheres' or moods are not congruent with empiricism and observable experience. Furthermore, they only correspond with the *a priori* to some extent, namely insofar as they concern the pre-empirical conditions of the presuppositions of knowledge and action. Resembling moods, they surpass Kant's pre-empirical *a priori* in

two respects: firstly, in that they – certainly not in a finite manner – do not aim at a whole *qua* idea or postulate, but rather can be followed back to a ground, which is presupposed as such; and secondly, through the effects emanating from those moods, which ultimately arise from feeling. According to Schleiermacher's insight into the anthropological function of religion one can or must assume that these effects indicate precisely this obligatory character of religion. This sense of obligation does not disappear, rather it secures, for being as such, epistemic reality and moral normativity. It is in this way that these effects join in the categorical function of transcendence.⁹

The moments of expanding reflection which are the marks of Schleiermacher's concept of religion are expressed in these aspects of autonomy, interpenetration and reflexive apprehension of knowledge and action; the latter two resting in a ground which is irretrievable but which accompanies all experiences atmospherically. For Schleiermacher, Kant's understanding of the *a priori* itself must be understood as an abstraction. It misunderstands the specific way humans are always already placed in the world through a foundational dispatching (*Disponierung*), just as all other categorical forms are. It is consequently the *status* of the *a priori* which, being retained in terms of the theory of validity, are conceived formally as being bound up in dispositions which substantively colour all knowledge and action. These dispositions evince a remaining, radical transcendence which is bundled in the individual, who represents the place at which the effects of being and essence (*Da- und Sosein*) consolidate into the experience of transcendence. Reality and validity thus posited are vouchsafed in experience as if from a ground. Schleiermacher illustrates the interconnection of transcendence and reflection on the grounds of the immediate self-consciousness in the individual with the bare asymptotic convergence of the real to the ideal: – as in the *Dialectic* (Schleiermacher 1986) (which focuses on the whole); in *The Christian Faith* (cf. Schleiermacher 2003, 39) (focusing on the ground); or with the infinite, the 'universe' in its effects – as in the *Speeches on Religion* (Schleiermacher 2014) (in which both the whole and the ground are considered).

What we can say is this: with regard to the history of ideas, Schleiermacher is looking to adopt concerns previously held by metaphysics about the apprehension of reality and the warrant for orientation, but he does so in alignment with critical shifts which accept neither a being-in-itself nor the notion of ahistorical truth. Schleiermacher changes track in line with this critical perspective and even takes it further – not in order to close the gap which had widened

⁹ One could reproach him for mixing origin and validity; however, he rather conceived them as interlocking in a way in which they could not be detached from one another.

between questions of being and validity, but in order to concretise thought and action. He accomplishes this feat by ascribing to the transcendental both a meaning emphasising a fundamental reaching out to the transcendent, as well as a meaning emphasising its being bound back onto experience. He can do this because he implements a distinction between the ground and the whole. This stands in service of rational comprehensibility, if not even retrievability. Such a distinction is possible in the case of religion because in the individual the ground can be identified in contradistinction from an apprehension of the whole. To the extent that religion coalesces in distinct and independent ways with morals and metaphysics or knowing, it adds that which is withdrawn from us but on which we nevertheless depend on as so far as reason asks for orientation. Therefore religion accompanies conceptual systematisation and practical action. This allows Schleiermacher to include specificity for being and validity without having to make a claim to rational apprehension.

The constellation of thought stands and falls with the said position of the individual, which Schleiermacher retains opposite modern subjectivity and which reveals the aporetic complex of criticism with respect to the understanding of reason. This culminates not in rationality, but rather in a specific capacity for perceiving respect for the whence of one's being addressed and the wither of the answer for which the individual stands. As a result, there is a kind of passivity embedded in the individual which the theories of self-determination of subjectivity can contour and critically reflect. This does not thereby lead to solipsism – as is always suspected when discussing modern reflective subjectivity – but rather to positing a mode of responsivity geared towards hearing and communication which dwells within the individual. This responsivity is inaugurated by a withdrawal which is always already intrinsic to the individual, manifesting itself as a singularity, but which is not the same as solipsism, but which rather – precisely because it is withdrawn – is able to overcome it by means of communication.¹⁰

On the theological level, what is withdrawn is to be integrated as an *extra nos* and indeed as nothing less than what makes being human into a *humanum*. This is not something, however, that the human being itself brings about on its own. The *humane* demands transcendence as a mode of being called into the formation of its human being as a person in its individuality (cf. Herms 2003). It is an invocation to the formation of its individuality and freedom which does not

10 What distinguishes Schleiermacher from Kant is the distinction between the ground and the whole. This makes it possible to make this distance plausible via transcendence, which in the self-consciousness demands for freedom as self-limitation and that means for freedom as social freedom, in order to make inter-subjectivity possible, that recognizes others as the others. As a result, this approach is essentially suited for pluralism.

consume the human being solipsistically, but rather places it in community with others. This kind of community understands itself to be ineluctable with such individuated ‘selves’ who are united together in personal freedom – and that is what distinguishes this self from the ‘selfish’ self, for which, say, Kierkegaard is misguidedly stigmatised, and also from the reflective subjectivity of Kant, which is marked by an essential self-referentiality. Freedom is in need of such selves in order to be able to approximate their goal of a community of those who are free.

In this turn into the inter-individual, religion demonstrates its spiritual-theoretical (*geisttheoretisch*) take-off power, which is also where the externally won and freedom oriented quality of Schleiermacher’s approach is asserted. This person-, freedom and community-forming ascending power can only be demonstrated by religion, as and in consciousness of the distance and the difference of reason to its ground in the individual. The distinction with respect to Kant and the representatives of German idealism is that Schleiermacher does not identify the individual with liberal reflective subjectivity, but rather that precisely the opposite is advanced: the individual is understood as pre-given, constituted in its ineluctability allowing it to be and to act. In the individual, as a singular and original category, the determinations of validity and reality which the subject draws on for accomplishing freedom and reality are interconnected. This means it is precisely this ground which appears in the religious consciousness as something external, so to speak, which cannot be made into an object, neither directly in speaking about God, nor indirectly as idea or postulate.¹¹ This is precisely the reason why the *externality* is not to be apprehended as ‘pure’, – and not to be located as pure reason – but instead as being bound up in historical circumstances. Reference to it ought to therefore only be made in terms of a *perspective* and in re-enactment of its effects in moments of convergence – or in expressions of distance.¹²

11 If this insight had remained in view, then the long sustained and constantly reappearing critique of Schleiermacher’s *Christian Faith* would have long been pronounced guilty of untenability and deceitfulness (cf. Barth 1980; see also Bayer 1985, 1005–16). This is because apart from piety as a feeling or as a consciousness-dependent subjectivist ‘play version’ of piety, which the so-called *extra nos* put up for negotiation, precisely this evaluation will be exposed as incorrect through the demonstration of the affinity of the religious with morals and metaphysics or philosophy.

12 Schleiermacher’s reconstruction of dogmatics corresponds meticulously to this insight in this context. Schleiermacher indeed introduces the anthropological turn in that he emphasizes the anthropological and cultural relevance of religion. However, he likewise demands the dogmatic reformulation of faith in all its connections. Thus, the anthropological turn for Schleiermacher does not mean an empirical dismissal of theoretical questions about validity. This means that in and through this interweaving of thinking and acting with religion, religion itself must be seen as contextual and therefore also conditioned by time and processes of development, irrespective,

It is precisely on such ground that Schleiermacher states in the ‘Second Speech’, ‘that one religion without God can be better than another with God’ (Schleiermacher 2001, 112; ET: Schleiermacher 2014, 54). This is true precisely on the grounds that a religion with recourse to God squanders its efficacy when God functions in it as a placeholder who merely refers to a special area of life which has neither anything to do with the other areas of life, nor is integrated into them.¹³ The task of Schleiermacher’s investigation and reformulation of Christian doctrine is not God in God’s self, but rather what appears under the perspective of faith defined as consciousness of difference.

3 The symbolic function of the concept of religion in service of emancipation and freedom

In order to achieve progress in the conceptual clarification of religion, I have weighted the phenomenon of religion in this paper with respect to its transcendental function by means of Schleiermacher’s work. It is significant to bear in mind that the concept of religion emerges in a time in which it must likewise also serve as a placeholder, namely, a placeholder for lost metaphysical and ontological self-understanding. As a result, it does not only accommodate various forms of explicit religion and a broad array of their symbols, but also forms that are hidden and not immediately identifiable. This interrelationship has been argued for in terms consonant with the sociology of religion about vague and diffuse religiosity all the way to an ‘affinity for religion’, which comes to bear as a decided mode of delimiting religion (cf. Luckmann 1991; Osthövenner 2015).

As will become clear, this diagnosis is relevant for the present investigation insofar as it is not at all arbitrary whether one knows about the context of even such hidden forms or the multifacetedness of what it is that religion stands for or not. Such forms of religion, as placeholders, precisely mark the place at which transcendence can be thematised and actively retained in its function for

however, of its transcendental connections. It is obligated in this regard to take into account the definitions of value and validity of a specific time. These are to be thoroughly examined for their potential to illuminate within the context of the authority of this time’s dogmatic framework. Cf. on this also the introduction by the editor Rolf Schäfer (Schleiermacher 2003, XV).

¹³ To the extent that Schleiermacher undertakes the methodological implementation of such an account in his dogmatics, Christian dogmatics as such expounds the explication of its determination at the beginning of the religious self-consciousness within and for its own time (cf. Herms 1984).

thinking and acting. This is because without a reflective self-reference which actually presupposes this reference to transcendence, there can be no discussion of a self-apprehension of subjectivity and consequently of autonomy and freedom – and along with them, of inter-subjectivity. To the extent that this reflective self-reference induces human beings to face themselves it leads them to maturity and responsibility with respect to self and the world. However, reference to reality cannot be waived if this process of self-reflection which sets forth claims to normativity and validity as such is to occur. This reference to reality, however, – as ought to have been demonstrated here – can be vouchsafed by the transcendental aspects characterising irreducible individuality.

Schleiermacher's theory of religion is open to an interpretation which makes apparent that the religious sphere is not finally put to rest in modernity but instead flows into the larger cultural sphere. It is precisely in such an interplay that the multifacetedness of a clarification of religion points to its ineluctable moments. Those are the two complementary ways in which distance, or difference, and transcendence can be determined, both of which subsequently consolidate in the concept of the symbol. The concept of distance stands for the essential self-understanding under normative conditions, which arise from the reaching out to the whole and aim to achieve unity in order to make possible the reflexive relationship of the self to itself (*Sich-zu-sich-selbst-Verhalten*). The concept of transcendence, on the other hand, stands for the necessity of the presupposition it shows of a ground which vouchsafes orientation. As a result, both concepts – distance and transcendence – stand for the polar diametrically opposite ends of the condition of being human, meaning they signify the attainment of autonomy and freedom as those emancipatory determinations of humanity which were striven for in the Enlightenment and which possess the potential to critically accompany its dialectic. They therefore appear to me to need to be declared as the support structure or bedrock of every conceptual clarification of the concept of religion. This is because in all striving towards autonomy, religion makes reference to transcendence as a category of presuppositions to rational thought which holds it open for the Other – for the stranger – and therefore makes distance to its own self possible.

This openness for others and this interpretability consequently revolve around the symbolic function of the concept of religion itself as placeholder for the lost metaphysical ground which must be considered with regard to the self-understanding of humans and to their orientation in thinking and acting. If the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment is not to be squandered, then the relation to reality represented by means of the symbol must be guaranteed. However, this can only be the case by the reaching out of the individual towards something transcendent which has always already imposed itself on the

individual and which can symbolically uphold this connection to reality. From the position of reflective self-assurance, religion in its symbolic function can stand for the regaining of the individual so that the emancipatory, modern subject does not have to be abandoned, but can rather be critically-constructively accompanied through the aforementioned connections. A fundamental connection between religion or transcendence and reason such as this will be concealed by the proponents of the theory of secularisation and also – by no means to a lesser extent – by unreflective references to a return of religion which argumentatively serves to ban any kind of critique of religion. It will not, furthermore, be thwarted any less by a revelational positivism or metaphysical adherence to ahistorical truths and pre-existing orders of being. All of these perspectives misplace the symbolically consolidated moments of openness in religion which evoke responsivity in particular and through which the grounding in reality is produced.

In its symbolic function, the concept of religion, considered as a placeholder for the transcendental elements, ensures humankind of its humanity and consequently warrants that the Enlightenment need not fall victim to its own dialectic and that freedom and emancipation need not regress into alienation and heteronomy. Rather, it is not to be adduced at all without being anchored in the individual as the place where the interconnection of transcendence and experience takes place. The task of a conceptual clarification of religion in its service towards self-assurance and self-determination is to remain aware of the symbolic meaning of religion as an anchor for the emancipation of thought and freedom in action, as was presaged by Kant, developed more extensively by Schleiermacher and as was then to be concretised by Kierkegaard with respect to the determination of the individual. Though for now, this final proponent of transcendence, must be reserved for another examination.

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