Research Article

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Imaginaries and Normativities. Experimental Impulses for Digital and Public Theologies

Abstract: The article explores how Digital and Public Theologies, two separate but overlapping discourses, can combine empirical and normative efforts. The article highlights the role that the sensitivity for context should play in the development of each of these theologies. To better understand the role of the context, the category of the imaginary is outlined with reference to Charles Taylor and Cornelius Castoriadis. This category helps to describe and criticize imaginaries that determine the social, psychological, political, and contextual realities which theology reflects on – this will be called the reflective or critical task of theology. The category also helps to describe and criticize the imaginaries that determine theological thinking itself, the perspective of a given theology as well as the orientations it suggests. This is the self-critical task of theology. Furthermore, I will suggest to see it as a constant and remaining task of theology to make its imaginations explicit and open to critique because these imaginations are the source of orientations that theology articulates. This calls for theologies that understand themselves as dynamic, unfinished, and discursive.

Keywords: imaginary, ethics, social ethics, norms, postcolonial theology, Public Theology, Digital Theology

1 Introduction

How can theology combine both, working empirically and providing normative orientation? This question is particularly relevant for theological discourses that deal with contemporary issues like the discourses of Public Theology[1] and Digital Theology.[2] Both need to perceive present phenomena empirically: Public Theology deals with the relevance of Christianity in contemporary societies; Digital Theology reflects on digital transformations. Both have assumed the task to critically reflect these phenomena.[3] Hence, they need some kind of normative orientation for this critique. How do empirical perception and these normative orientations in Public and Digital Theology come together? This article will focus on this question in order to contribute to the discourses of Public and Digital Theology. Hence, the focus is not on concepts of Public and Digital Theology – see notes 1 and 2 for more on this – but rather on categories for the work of Public and Digital Theologies.

To address this question in this article, I will introduce some rather experimental ideas for my own account of Public Theology and Digital Theology. These ideas are part of my book on responsibility which is in the publication process;[4] they have been discussed in a workshop on "Inductive Systematic Theology" in Zürich in May 2023.

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1 Cf. Höhne, *Öffentliche Theologie* and the literature quoted there.
2 Cf. Phillips et al., "Digital Theology."
3 Ibid., 37.
4 Cf. Höhne, *Verantwortung*.

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I will start by explaining the thesis that the reality[5] of theology provides the framework of its normativity (2), which leads to the need to elaborate on the concept of imaginaries (3). On this background, the role of normativity in theology is discussed (4) and connected with two impulses (5).

2 Realities

I start by explaining the following thesis: The reality of theology is interrelated with the framework in which theologians make normative statements, decide about their methods, and think about their social relevance. This thesis might sound provocative or self-evident. In any case, it is highly ambiguous because the term "reality of theology" is ambiguous; it can mean two things:

First, the term "reality of theology" can mean the realities which theologians talk about: the practical life of Christians, faith communities, the doctrines of Christian traditions, biblical texts, contemporary societies with their political and ethical issues, and so on. Theology perceives these realities by means of empirical research or thorough exegesis, for example, by means of existential speculation or with historical methods.

Second, the term "reality of theology" can also mean the reality of the academic praxis of theologians: the writing, thinking, and working; the subjects, objects, and institutions; the research, reflections, and discourses that we call theology.[6] This praxis is always contextual. It is intertwined with the biography, the social position, and the institutional working conditions of the theologian.

The ambiguity of these two meanings is intended because this ambiguity plays a decisive role in the actual praxis of theology: How theologians describe reality and what topics they write and think about depends on the praxis and the context in which they work. For example, a Lutheran associate professor at a rich university in the US might find other topics important than a German PhD student without reliable income. Hence, theology's references to reality happen within the framework for which the social reality of the theologian allows. Who is actually doing theology? In what institutional context is theology happening, in which society and on which position in society? The answers to these questions will make a difference to how a theologian sees and interprets reality in the first sense. To put it more playful: The reality of theology is determined by the reality of theology.

Some theological traditions tend to hide this interrelation – be it intentionally, explicitly, or subconsciously. Many younger approaches have made it their project to embrace the interdependence between the two realities of theology: the New Political Theologies of the 1960s and 1970s, Liberation Theologies and Post- or Decolonial Theologies, from Public Theologies to Digital Theologies – they all come together in the intention to treat the social, political, public, colonial, or medial reality of the academic praxis of theology itself explicitly as a part of the reality that theology reflects on.[7] For example, when David Tracy writes about "Theology as Public Discourse"[8] and paints a "Social Portrait of the Theologian," he does precisely that: He treats the discursive and social reality that constitutes theological knowledge as decisive for theology:[9] "In principle, society and academy are not purely external relationships or publics for the responsible theologian. In fact, the socialization process will also assure that they are not merely external to the attitudes of any theologian."[10]

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5 In Höhne, *Verantwortung* the category of praxis from praxis-sociology is used for what I have called "reality" here in order to skip a longer introduction into the category of praxis.
6 In my book on responsibility, I refer to this kind of reality using the category of praxis from praxis-sociology (cf. Höhne).
7 For public theology's reflection on its contextuality, see, for example, Bedford-Strohm et al., *Contextuality*. For postcolonial theologies and theology's realities, see, for example, Silber, *Postkoloniale Theologien*, 45. See also Friedrich et al., "Citizen Theology."
8 Tracy, "Theology." In one of his most famous books, he writes: "This book will argue that all theology is public discourse" (Tracy, *Analogical*, 3).
9 Cf. Tracy, particularly pp. 3–46, quote on p. 3.
10 Tracy, 31.

Coming from the discourse of Public Theology, moving into Digital Theology, and indebted to many of the just mentioned traditions, I want to embrace the complex interdependence of the two realities. This interdependence shall be the starting point for reflecting on the normativity, the methods, and the social relevance of theology. Hence, the starting point for my reflection here is the following conviction: Theology's social, political, discursive, and therewith contextual reality impacts theology's perspective on reality.

This view has a price. As a consequence, universal statements without discourse are not possible anymore; the use of the singular becomes suspicious:[11] If a theologian deals consciously with the fact that theology's perspective on reality is constituted by its own social reality, this very theologian will, as an individual, not be able to formulate universal truths without the discourse with others. What has been called "universal truth" will have to be seen as an imagination from one specific social, political, discursive, and contextual standpoint.

Such a theology cannot entail the following sentence anymore:[12] "The human (singular!) is a religious being." It can entail the following: "I am a western, German-speaking, white, cis-male, reasonable rich and privileged, queer, protestant etc. theologian, coined by Lutheran traditions with a pinch of reformed Christianity. As such, I have learned to see myself as a religious being. Hence, I presume others to be likewise." If the boast "Man is a religious being" could count as universal truth, then only due to thinkers, who had the power and privilege to make this specific experience and teaching count as universal. But doing this would not be coherent with a theology that tries to acknowledge how its perspective on reality is determined by its own social and political reality. Rather, as a theologian I have to take my own position in society, in the world, and in power relation into account when formulating claims to universality. Then, these claims need to be tested in discourse.

How can a meaningful theological work look like that embraces the realities of theology, deals openly with its own contextuality – and still remains able to present normative orientations? That is the question, this article deals with. In my book on responsibility, I have made one suggestion for how this could happen:[13] There, I work with the category of the social imaginary. The social imaginary is part of the social and individual reality of theologians. The category helps to describe the framework for each theology's perspective on the world, for its sense-making and orientations. Hence, the category of the social imaginary names the framework for the empirical as well as the normative efforts of theology. Furthermore, it names an always contextual framework. Thereby, it provides a category for the self-critique of theology: the critique of one's own contextual imaginations and their further development.

3 Imaginaries

What does the term "social imaginary" mean?[14] It is prominently used by Charles Taylor, who defines:

> By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence,

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11 The problem of anthropological universalization with the use of the singular has already been theologically discussed, for example, in the discourse on gender diversity (cf. Wustmans, "Sensibilität," 181f, and the literature quoted there) and by Clemens Wustmans himself (cf. Wustmans, "Sensibilität," 180).

12 The following anthropological example relies on and is inspired by the anthropological work of Clemens Wustmans, see particularly Wustmans, "Sensibilität," 180–2.

13 My book on responsibility will be published under the title "Verantwortung in der evangelischen Ethik. Begriff – Imagination – soziale Praxis" with de Gruyter (Höhne, *Verantwortung*). See there for a more extended and thorough explanation of the following thoughts. But the argument of this article is understandable on its own. In the book, I distinguish the terms "imaginary" as something social and individual imaginations. In this article and for the sake of its brevity, I do not differentiate between imaginations and imaginaries.

14 For the following reflections on the "social imaginary," see also Höhne, chapters 2.2 and 2.3; some of the quotes and thoughts here are identical with those found in these chapters.

how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.[15]

Hence, the term "social imaginary" refers to imaginations that provide a horizon for a group's and a person's sense-making and acting.[16] As such, they are not merely individual imaginations but they are "shared by large groups of people."[17] These shared imaginations refer to the images, norms, and connections that are taken for granted.[18] Already for Taylor, the social imaginary "is both factual and normative."[19] This makes it an attractive concept in the attempt to answer the question of this article. The imaginary refers to an "inarticulate understanding of our whole situation .... It can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its unlimited and indefinite nature."[20] Hence, the attempt to describe the imaginary explicitly will never fully succeed; it will always entail blind spots.

A common example for such a reference to the social imaginary is the "imagined community" of a nation that Benedict Anderson has elaborated on.[21] If people imagine a national community and themselves as part of this nation, this imagination can have a huge impact on their *actions* – f.e., volunteering to fight in an army for instance – and *sense-making* – f.e., seeing sacrifices for the nation as something good.[22]

Social imaginaries are highly relevant to theology because they are part of the reality theology reflects on: For Taylor, the social imaginary "is carried in images, stories, and legends."[23] The stories told by Christians, the liturgies performed by Christians, and all of Christian practice carry and spread imaginations of good life, of self-understanding, of individual and social meaning, of society, the world, and their relation to God. Traditionally, Christian imaginations have a huge impact on how people act and think of themselves and others. To my view, it is one important task of theology to describe these imaginations as far as possible, to inquire into their origins, and to criticize them and their tradition where necessary. This could be called the reflective or *critical task of theology*.[24]

Social imaginaries are also highly relevant to theology because they are part of the reality of theological praxis itself:[25] Often unquestioned and barely explicitly, they provide the horizon of a theologian's work. The social imagination of nationality, for example, was and is not only a reality, theology describes – it was and is, again and again, the horizon of theological thinking itself: Just think of theologies of orders of creation which took the differentiation of humanity into peoples as a divinely given order. Hence, it is the second important task of theology to describe the imaginations that frame its own perception and critique of reality as far as possible. This could be called the self-reflective or *self-critical task of theology*.[26]

To deepen my understanding of these two tasks, I have worked with Cornelius Castoriadis' concept of the imaginary.[27] This concept is similar to Taylor's but more elaborated.

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15 Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 23.
16 According to Taylor, "the social imaginary" allows for "common practices" (Taylor, 23); therewith, it coins acting (cf. Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.2.3); for imaginaries as horizon for sense-making, see Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 24f., 27f; Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 554.
17 Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 23.
18 Ibid., 23f.
19 Ibid., 24.
20 Ibid., 25.
21 Cf. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
22 For the example of nationality, see also Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 253–5.
23 Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 23.
24 For further reflection on this task, see Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.3.3 and the literature referenced there. For the distinction between reflective and orienting concepts, see also van Oorschot, "Network."
25 Cf. Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.3.3.
26 For further reflection on this task, see Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.3.3 and the literature referenced there.
27 See Höhne, particularly chapter 2.2.1. See ibid. also for more literature and references on this and a longer explanation of the thoughts summarized here. The main source for Castoriadis thinking here is Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, the introductions of Gertenbach, "Castoriadis," and the interpretations in Strauss, "Imaginary;" Honneth, *Welt*, 144–64; Habermas, *Diskurs*, 380–9 as well as in Wabel, *Kirche*.

While Castoriadis is a post Marxist social theorist who applies the concept of imaginaries to social institutions,[28] he uses the term also in the context of his psychological writings where he is indebted to Freud's and Lacan's psycho-analysis:[29] He understands the imaginary in a certain proximity to Freud's notion of the subconscious and Lacan's "discourse of the other."[30] For him, the subject has to do with imaginations that are ambivalent insofar as they can alienate the subject.[31] Hence, he sees the constant task of explication and critique of these imaginations – and this never-ending praxis of explication and critique is precisely what he aims at: This praxis *is* autonomy.[32]

Castoriadis theory has inspired me because he does not only see the psychological role of imaginations on the level of the individual but also the social role. On both levels, individually, psychologically, as well as socially, he sees imaginations as potentially alienating:[33] Psychologically, they work as inner compulsion, as narrowed horizons or wrong perceptions[34] but socially, they can also work as external force:[35] The imaginary does not only constitute the subject but also the institution; this insight is the outcome of his theory of institutionalization and symbolization.[36]

Before I sketch that, a brief example of Castoriadis hopefully puts some flesh to these abstract ideas: The imagination of nationality is an important example for Castoriadis too.[37] How does this imagination work? Inspired by Castoriadis, I understand this as follows: Such imaginations of nationality can have a psychological impact on people. Because I feel as a member of a certain "imagined community,"[38] I feel compelled to volunteer as soldier. If one realizes that nationality is "just" an imagination, one can reduce this feeling psychologically. But simultaneously, Castoriadis points to "the other" being incorporated externally.[39] According to my interpretation, this means: I encounter the imagination of nationality also in the "draft" of "my" nation that compels me with external means.[40] This example shows how the idea of incorporated imaginaries makes them even more relevant for theology and ethics – it calls for a social ethics that deals with the incorporated imaginaries that have forceful influence on the individual, its freedom, or its lack of freedom.

For Castoriadis, the theory behind these incorporations is one of symbolization: Castoriadis understands institutionalization as the process in which symbols and their meanings are connected and sanctioned.[41] For him, the imaginary refers to a non-intentional surplus of meaning in this process; the imaginary transcends the functionality and rationality of this connection and generates new and further meanings.[42] To stay with the imagination of nationality, which serves as an example for Castoriadis too:[43] The institutionalization of the German nation connects the symbol "Germany" with the meaning to mean a certain group of people with certain rights and duties; this connection and this meaning can be seen as functional and rational.[44] But in the course of history, the symbol "Germany" also acquired other meanings, imaginary meanings: an imagined

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28 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 196–282.

29 Ibid., 172–81. See also Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.2.1.2 and the literature quoted there.

30 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 172–5, quote from p. 174, my translation.

31 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 175f., particularly p. 176.

32 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 176–83, 128f., 267, particularly p. 177.

33 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 175, 226.

34 Ibid., 174–6.

35 Ibid., 185f., 218f., 243, 247, 252, 255.

36 Ibid., 199–226, particularly p. 225.

37 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 254f.

38 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

39 Cf.: "Der andere ist demnach woanders als im individuellen Unbewußten, "verkörpert", obschon er auch dort über eine Vertretung verfügen muß, damit er sich verkörpern kann [...]." (Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 186)

40 For this example, see Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 186. See already for this example Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.2.1.4.

41 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 200, 214f., 219, 226, 248; Wabel, *Kirche*, 406. See also in similar German words Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.2.1.3.

42 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 206, 214, 217–26, 233f., 241–50, 253–5., particularly 225f.

43 The following example is inspired by what Castoriadis writes about the "flag" and its meaning (cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 224) and about nationality and collective identity (cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 253–5); it shall illustrate my understanding of Castoriadis' theory.

44 Cf. without reference to Germany: Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 254.

history of communality, an imagined meaning of sense and purpose – all the things that made people have special feelings when seeing a symbol of this nation.[45]

Hence, the imaginary deepens the connection of symbol and meaning for Castoriadis, but it also has its own dynamic in which it can become alienating and gain power over people.[46]

I took the example of nationality because it is prominent in the discourse on imaginations. The downside of this example is: In an ethical perspective, this example leads one to emphasize what might appear as the primarily negative side of imaginations. But for Castoriadis, human's individual and collective capacity[47] to produce imaginations is not only negative but ambivalent.[48] The imaginary gives a sense of purpose and provides the horizon for making sense of present reality and possible courses of action.[49] These imaginations can also liberate people and orient society towards more just structures – take imaginations of individual freedom, for example.[50] Castoriadis himself emphasizes that the imaginary is not only the "root" of alienation but also the root of "the creation of everything New in history" insofar as this creation is made possible by human's "ability to imagine" something new:[51] a better future for instance. Plus, Castoriadis stresses the dynamic of the imaginary. There is no social way to end the emerging of always new imaginaries.[52] Following Castoriadis' approach, a constant explication and critical assessment of these ambivalent imaginations is necessary.[53]

On this background, theology and ethics will not only criticize imaginations, they also incorporate and search for better imaginations. Here, I see the task of a Public and Digital Theologies: When reflecting on digital transformation and on the public relevance of Christianity, they can describe (religious) imaginaries in society; they criticize imaginaries and they point to incorporations of better imaginaries; and they look for narratives that incorporate better imaginaries. If theologians do this, the reality of theology in both senses will be public and of public relevance.

If the unpredictable imaginative capacity of individuals and groups is ambivalent and in need of such differentiation,[54] the following question is pressing: After thoroughly and empirically describing imaginations, how is theology able to distinguish relatively better and relatively worse imaginations and narratives? To put it shorter: Where does normativity come from?

4 Normativities

What I have said so far has answered this question on a descriptive level, not yet on a constructive level.[55] What do I mean by that? I will start with the descriptive level and then turn to the constructive level. The category of imaginations and of the social imaginary allows for a *description* of the origin of normativity in the reality theology reflects on. Normativity is deeply carved into the social imaginary.[56] As described above,

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45 Cf. For the same points without reference to Germany Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 254f., 224.

46 Cf. Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.2.1.3, 2.3.3.2 and the literature quoted there, particularly Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 214, 218f., 226. For the dynamic of the imaginary and in society and see particularly Castoriadis, 529, 580f., 601, 603, 606f.

47 For the "*capacité imaginaire*" see Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 218.

48 Cf. Höhne, *Verantwortung* and the literature quoted there, particularly Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 226, 229, 603.

49 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 220, 226, 237, 243, 253–6, 542. For the imaginary as horizon see particularly Gertenbach, "Castoriadis," *Gesellschaft*, 286; Wabel, *Kirche*, 408, 416.

50 For the imaginary "as a potential source of creativity and freedom" in Castoriadis' work cf. Strauss, "Imaginary," 324.

51 Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 229, my translation of the parts quoted from Castoriadis. See also Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 603; and Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.2.1.3.

52 Cf. Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 176f., 529.

53 That the task is a constant one for Castoriadis is particularly obvious, where he talks about psychology: Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft*, 177.

54 See above, particularly footnotes 47, 48, and the literature quoted there.

55 For a more thorough and extended account of the following thoughts, see Höhne, *Verantwortung*, particularly chapter 2.3.3.

56 Already Charles Taylor's definition of the social imaginary illustrates this normativity (see quote above).

the social imaginary of a group entails frameworks. It prefigures and coins individual and collective actions, normative statements, basic orientations, and value-judgements.[57] For example, Taylor has elaborated on the social imaginary "of the modern understanding of moral order" that idealizes the individual; it entails and frames the positive evaluation of individual freedom and makes the fight for individual rights appear reasonable.[58] This shows how the category of the imaginary allows for describing the origin of normativity: Normativity is rooted in the imaginary. The critical task of theology consists in the evaluation of these imaginaries in their role of constituting and forming normativity. In my book on responsibility, I followed this path and asked whether imaginations of responsibility practically liberate people and help them act more responsible.[59]

But how about the constructive task? Where does the orientation for such critical assessments come from? I have started with the intention to embrace the interdependence of the two senses of the term "reality of theology." Hence, all what I have just said applies for the social reality of theological praxis itself too: Inescapably, theological praxis is coined by the social imaginary of a given society and of given groups, including Christian communities.[60] In the horizon of this social imaginary, theology's descriptions, orientations, and social criticisms make sense. For example, in a piece on ecclesial imaginations, I have tried to show how the ethical criticism and social ethics of some German theologies right after the Second World War only made sense within the imagination that the church is some kind of pure reference point in opposition to a darker and chaotic society.[61]

Hence, theology's orientations come from its own practical reality – nolens volens: Theologians can engage in the conscious attempt to contribute ethical orientation to the public discourse; within the categorical framework presented here, I understand this as the conscious attempt to make the normative implications of one's imaginations explicit, i.e., to translate them into explicit arguments.

But even where theologians claim to just describe reality, they will carry the normative implications of their imaginative horizon into their description. I can try to be conscious of as many normative presuppositions of my work as possible, but there will always remain blind spots; I might remain unconscious of where my contextual social imaginary coins my description the most.[62]

Theology's normativity comes from its own reality, hence the aforementioned necessity of self-critique: Theology's work itself is coined by the ever-changing and dynamic imaginaries of its contexts (see above), i.e., the imaginaries of its church and its Christian community, its milieu, its society, its individual biography and background, its university, and its academic working conditions.[63] Among others, these imaginaries include imaginations of god, of the human–god relationship, of the Christian community, and its relation to the world or of what it means to be human. All these imaginations emerge from a complex and dynamic interplay of individual and social factors, of philosophical, and other traditions, including academic theology itself.

Furthermore, one could argue that theology is not only coined by imaginaries but also that academic theology itself can be understood as an institutionalization of social imaginaries, namely, of a certain imagination of the relation of university, state, and theology as well as an imagination of a theology differentiated from, yet related to, a church.[64] Hence, a given theology is made possible by a contextual social imaginary, and it draws its own imaginary from the dynamic interrelation of its different contextualities, including its own academic context. I learnt from Castoriadis that the dynamic of these imaginaries is ambivalent. This makes the constant process of self-critique of theology necessary.

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57 Cf. Taylor's elaboration on the social imaginary: Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 23–30.

58 Cf. Taylor, *Imaginaries*, 2, 3, 19–22, quote from p. 19. For this example, see already Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.3.3.1.

59 Cf. Höhne.

60 For this and what follows, see Höhne, particularly chapter 2.3.3.1.

61 Cf. Höhne, "Wo noch?."

62 Cf. Höhne, *Verantwortung*, chapter 2.3.3.1.

63 For the context of the theologian and particularly for church, academy, and society as contexts of the theologian, see Tracy, *Analogical*.

64 I thank reviewer one for the hint to point this out.

Theology's orientations come from its own historical, social, political, ecclesial, academic, and contextual reality and its own imaginary. This entails a thought that, at greater length, I have elaborated on elsewhere:[65] The thought starts with Karl Barth's famous distinction of religion and faith[66] and asks in how far the reality of theology could not only be seen as social, psychological, practical, discursive, and human reality but also as a theological reality that entails God's revelation in a non-controllable, non-available, and hidden way. This thought can help to address the question which imaginary is particular to theology. But elaborating further on it would exceed the scope if this argument.

5 Trapped?

What I have said so far might sound as if theologies, even critical theologies, are caught in a trap: They cannot escape their own imaginative horizons that constitute their normativity while they should try to reflect on their own imaginations. I do claim that the social imaginary is where theology's orientations, practically, come from. And I do claim with Taylor and Castoriadis that a full description or critique of these imaginations is impossible. Still, I do not see this as a trap – because of time and discourse:[67]

Time: Caught in the moment of praxis, my conscious and unconscious imaginations are the horizon I cannot transcend. I will describe and orient other realities including their imaginaries within the horizon of my own imaginations. But in hindsight, I can reflect and criticize my own imaginations – this might change my future judgments. Hence, it remains a constant task, to make one's own imagination as explicit as possible, to reflect and criticize them. Of course, this will happen within the horizon of one's own imaginations at a given moment in time. But one can be open to do so again within in the horizon of one's imaginations at a later moment in time.

Discourse: I can also encounter other people who share in a different social imaginary. In a discourse, I can exchange viewpoints and arguments with them. The mutual dialogue can make imaginations explicit and serve as a ground of critique: Discourses can help to make one's own imaginations explicit and open to critique.

Hence, both, reflection in hindsight and discourse, can help to make theology's own imaginaries explicit in order to evaluate in how far they provide a better framework for theology's empirical and normative work.

To sum up: These reflections include the following impulses for Digital and Public Theologies:

- In their work of describing and evaluating the digital transformations and the public relevance of Christian realities, Digital and Public Theologies should work with Taylor's and Castoriadis' category of the imaginary. This category helps to explicate and criticize the imaginations that inform digital transformations, the constitution of public spheres as well as the reality of theology itself. This category can help theology to be critical as well as self-critical.
- Following the argument of this article, Digital and Public Theologies should understand their work as ongoing, never completed task of explication and critique of the imaginaries that inform their own work.
- For the very same reason, Digital and Public Theologies should understand their own work as discursive.

A Digital Theology and a Public Theology that work with the category of the imaginary as I have suggested will come to understand themselves as an always unfinished and discursive theology. To put it in different words: The reality of theology is social and dynamic – and needs to be social, dynamic, and discursive to deal with its own blind spots.

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65 Cf. Höhne, chapter 2.3.3.2.

66 Cf. Barth, *Wort Gottes*, 304–97.

67 For an extended elaboration of this trap and of the following ways of dealing with this "trap," see Höhne, *Verantwortung*, particularly chapter 2.3.3.1. and 2.3.3.3.

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