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How Can Religions Shape the World? Christianity and Islam Inspiring Pluralist Societies

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Abstract

The role of religions in present-day societies has to be reconsidered. Let us pause for a minute and reflect on one word in this initial thesis. One should not resort to discussing only the “function” of religions; because if they have a mere function, religions are seen as subservient to other actors. Religions would thus be reduced to instruments of human power, simply stabilising a political system or cultural structure, which in turn may be unwilling to be influenced and reshaped by what religions have to say. Of course, states, cultures, societies may express their expectations to a given religious community; but that community will also have questions to ask and suggestions to make. So, how can a sociologically informed theology answer the question: what should be the role of religions in our societies today?

Religion in Society

Why should the role of religions be “reconsidered,” as was claimed above? Because previous socio- theological models no longer work. Which models were at issue before?

Uniformity: “the religious nation”

In Europe, until today, a nostalgia can be felt among some Christians. Just like more or less all nostalgias, what is propagated is a revival of something past which at closer analysis never existed. That nostalgia is hoping for a revival of “the Christian occident.” The picture of the past that is being painted is that of a time when all were Christians. The big question which such nostalgic aspirations need to

be confronted with is this: has there ever been such a society? Premodern Europe, for one, consisted of societies marked by dissent; a dissent, however, which was often hidden for fear of sanctions but often also beyond control. Still, the nostalgia draws an image of uniformity. The catch-word for this type of coordination of religion and society is “the religious nation.” This word is particularly apt for the pre-modern European situation; because at that time, typically, one was not considered a Christian because of one’s own insight but simply because one was born into a group whose leader was baptised. The formula ran that one was a “*natus christianus*,” a born Christian. Islamists regularly propose similar ideas of revival. An idealized nation is being presented as the true model of peace and welfare. Ironical critics of that nostalgia paraphrase its hope jokingly: “when will we finally return to where we have never been?!”

Contrast: “my religious confession”

When religious protagonists perceive the present situation to be irretrievably heterogenous, often their solution is to live in counter-distinction. Identity is created by demarcating what one is *not*. Sociologists now call this dynamic “othering.” Others are marked out as different, as not belonging to “us”; but who “we” are is precisely defined by negating what the other is claimed to be. Historically, this societal model is now called “confessionalism.” It was first spotted after the European Reformations. “Catholic” was no longer a term uniting all Christians. Rather, it had turned into designating one group. “Catholic” has thus become a word which divides Christians. The “others”—the “protestants”, as the English language has it—called themselves often “evangelic,” which means “truly shaped by the Gospel.” Again a word that should really unite all Christians but in fact became the name of one Christian party over against the others. What in English is called “denominations,” is in the countries where the Reformation started, termed “confessions.” The “confessional” era lives on othering. Now, it is worth noting that a process of “confessionalisation” began on many levels. It took place within the various religious groups (Lutherans, Reformed, Roman-Catholics); but one could also observe how other systems of society became “confessionalized.” What is meant by this term? Education, administration, art and science became more and more shaped by religious tenets. And religion became “confession” also in the sense that people now were expected to *decide* about their belonging, to *know* the creeds of their religious group and to *hold* them.

One more historical remark is due here. Confessionalisation is not a merely Christian phenomenon. Recently, scholarship has started to observe analogous processes in Islam, namely between Turks and Persians, that is, between Ottomans

and Safawides: a sunna/shia rivalry. The problem with the theo-sociological model of “confession” is that its way to truth, identity and world-shaping works through exclusion of an “other.” In modernity such claims at exclusion have lost credibility. Confessional models of society prove to weaken the world-shaping power of religions rather than liberating it.

So, the previous models of coordinating religions and societies are problem-laden. The religious paradigm of “nation” is based on false memory; and the paradigm of “confession” is self-destructive. Many contemporary societies are pluralistic when it comes to religion. That is to say, they are not based on one particular religious view. Many religions, on the other hand, want to be more than private convictions. They want to shape the world. This is why we have to ask anew: how can a religion be world-shaping within a pluralistic society? A new model is needed.

Testimony: “a religious inspiration”

Religions have to swallow a bitter pill. They are not the only candidate who wants to shape this world. There are other religions on the market; and there are non-religious tendencies, indeed, there are antireligious options. This is in fact the right word for describing the originality of the current religious situation in a growing number of countries: religion has become an “option.” In this situation, a religion should not hope to be the one nation “again,” nor should it lose time in proving others wrong. How, then, can a religion be world-shaping?

In fact, religions such as Christianity and Islam should welcome that new situation rather than mourn an alleged golden age lost. There are even theological arguments for that, as we shall see in a moment. One should only, before that, point out that the present situation with its religious “options” is not so fundamentally different from earlier eras. Let us now see why Christianity and Islam can *welcome* their role in a pluralistic society today when harking back to their early years: Christianity’s core message was controversial from its very outset: the proclamation of Christ risen from the dead left the majority of its addressees unimpressed. This is why the Early Church learned to live as a body over against most of society and state, distinct from, but not destructive to, others. That is why Christians understood themselves from early on as “light of the world.” And Islam started out with Jews, Christians and polytheists present. Therefore, religious arguments are part of Islam’s most original activity; not however in order to eliminate others, but in order to convince them.

In a plural context, the model to be followed by religions should once again be that of “testimony”; and the religious agenda for interaction with a pluralist society consequently falls under a new name, that is, “inspiration”. Before we study these two dynamics—witnessing and inspiring—we need to listen to what religions themselves have to say.

Should their messages be “translated into secular terms,” as the sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas famously requests? No. It is part of their witnessing and inspiring power that they do not adapt their own message to how everyone else speaks anyway.

Overcoming Memory

Can one find a concept which names what in fact all Abrahamic religions are doing in their witnessing, inspiring presence? The concept to be proposed here is “overcoming memory.” This should be explored for a moment by looking at what Islam and the Church are actually doing. By considering them separately, one may also spot a particular profile in the Islamic and the Ecclesial inspiration respectively.

The Qur’an

Let us look at a Sura of the Qur’an. It is not by coincidence that we are studying a whole Sura rather than isolating parts of it or even pick various quotes according subjecting them to a predefined thesis. No, a Qur’anic Sura also is a message by its form. Here is a short one

ad-Duha — “The Morning Brightness”

In the Name of God, the Merciful Giver of Mercy

93:1 By the morning brightness,

2 and by the night when still,

3 thy Lord has not forsaken thee; nor does He despise.

4 And the future will be better for you than the past.

5 And surely thy Lord shall give unto thee, and thou shalt be content.

6 Did He not find thee an orphan and shelter,

7 find thee astray and guide,

8 and find thee in need and enrich?

9 So as for the orphan, scorn not.

10 And as for one who requests, repel not.

11 And as for the blessing of thy Lord, proclaim!

The Sura sets out within a knot of ambiguities: the brightness of morning and the silence of night; a voice speaking leaving it unclear whether it is God who is speaking, or an angel or whether it is, rather, a prophetic soliloquy; between a sense of being forsaken and respected by God (3), between future and past, both biographically and eschatologically (4). But the promises (4 and 5) have a grounding; the addressee (Muhammad) is encouraged to praise on the basis of recalling God's past benefits. Thus, the Sura is an appeal to memory; a memory of what happened to Muhammad—and to just any person ready to listen and to count their own blessings. The particular type of remembering to which the Qur'an invites here follows a typical structure which can also be found in the Old and New Testaments. It is an "overcoming memory" in several senses of the concept. An overcoming memory follows a seven-step scheme.

1. **Embarrassment.** It may be disconcerting to be reminded of one's humble beginnings, indeed of one's previous weakness. "You were once slaves," is Israel reminded in Deuteronomy. A person's present status is not to be taken for granted.
2. **Gratitude.** Reminded of God's past actions in one's own favour, one comes to a sense that God is actually at work in history, also in one's own life. A sense of joyful acknowledgement of one's own dependence can thus grow; in other words: gratitude.
3. **Dignity.** The benefits received are, however, not mentioned because God wants to hear a word of thanksgiving; God does not want to humiliate the human being. Rather, the reminder of God's past help is given in order to make the addressee sense their own dignity: I am worth of God's attention, God values me.
4. **Confidence.** On that solid basis, a new look towards one's personal future becomes possible: a perspective of trust in God's unremitting support. The dynamic does, however, not end here. The reminder of one's own humble and indeed precarious past has another aim:
5. **Empathy.** The person thus reminded can now feel: I was helped out of a seemingly hopeless situation. Other people are in such situations right now. I can understand what their life feels like, indeed, I remember; but the appeal does not end in sentiment.

6. Care. The reminder which was just a moment before still a consolation is now an injunction. You know what it feels like; now you are the strong one. God's help works through God's creatures. Now it is your turn to help others. Do not close your heart, do not close your hands. You have the power to help others overcome their predicament.

7. Celebration. The end of the Sura, and the end of the scheme of overcoming memory, is not a call to social work. Rather, the conclusion is a reminder to announce God's grace, and that is to say, to both celebrate before God and to witness to God's work before people.

The Eucharist

One may be tempted to compare Sura 93 with a reminder like this Johannine verse:

John 13:34b Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.

But we should not fall into the trap of presenting Christianity as a text-based religion. Its foundation is not a text, but Jesus' activity. And that holds true on many levels: at the beginning of Christianity was not the New Testament but the Easter experience; what made the disciples go was not what Jesus said but how they received from him; and at the centre of the Christian practice was not the reading of Bible but the celebration of Christ's Eucharist—and in the first disciple's experience, the Eucharist was not their activity but Christ at work among them. A reflex of that can be found in the Emmaus story, where Luke presents two disciples encountering Jesus; when they invite him to stay it is no longer them who are the hosts, but rather:

Luke 24:30 When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.

The scheme just presented in light of the Qur'anic Sura clearly also works here. The Early Church's process went from embarrassment to gratitude, dignity, confidence, empathy, care and celebration. And that is the basic dynamics of Christian life till today, both in the community and in one's personal life.

Recitation and Representation

If we want to characterise the particularity of Islamic "overcoming memory" on the one side, and its Christian counterpart in a short formula, we can point out that Islam is fundamentally "overcoming memory in recitation" and Christianity is "overcoming memory in representation." The practice of Qur'anic recitation is, for

Muslims, more than just quoting a text; they understand that they are given the favour reproduce God's own words. Remembering God's care for Muhammad and for oneself, opens people to be caring themselves: to take their role in working for a civilisation of responsibility. The practice of Christians celebrating the Eucharist is not just remembering Jesus; they understand, rather, that he is risen from the dead and is now active in his community. He is not only the reason for Eucharistic thanksgiving, he is the host of the Eucharist. So, overcoming memory of Christianity is "representation" because Christ is entering history again, starting to transform all of creation into his own loving life, into "the body of Christ."

Practicing an inspiring testimony

With this back-up in mind, we are now returning to our socio-theological attempt to unfold the necessary paradigm shift after "nation" and "confession," namely to "inspiration." We said that inspiration works through witness. Before we enter into a study of what witnessing is, let us get three fundamental concepts clear

Politics is the shaping of the world through public power.

The *state* is the system of institutions based on its monopoly to violence.

Religion is the shaping of the world through testimony.

Now we can study what testimony—witnessing—is and how it fits precisely into the current challenges of religion.

Testimony

One can sketch out a phenomenology of testimony in light of four characteristics. Witnessing is always marked by these aspects:

- 1. Perspective.** Testimony is based on a subjective experience. A witness might have seen the scene under discussion from an angle which allowed observation of only part of the action.
- 2. Perception.** Still, witnesses are only then really giving testimony when they are not making up a story but rather present what they saw or heard. In that sense, the testimony is beyond the witness's subjectivity.
- 3. Purity.** A testimony cannot, if it is genuine, be used to manipulate others. Testimony is to be "deposited" and then has to leave the listeners free to do with it what they decide.
- 4. Personality.** A final characteristic of witness lies in the life of the person who gives witness. Their credibility is often linked to their lifestyle. A testimony becomes more convincing if the witness proves to be a reliable

person. Often, the testimony is also meant to reshape the witness. That leads normally also to more credibility—of contents and person.

Inspiration

The fundamental question we are trying to answer is, which role should religions have in our societies. We were able to exclude two responses: a religion cannot be (at least, not any more) the “nation”—the one unifying factor of a society; equally problematic was the answer “confession”—a truth-claim that tries to eliminate its rivals. The new model we proposed was: a religion can be, in a pluralist society, an inspiration. Now, what does that mean concretely? Five aspects can be made out.

- 1. 100% no more.** A religion can be an inspiration if it accepts two painful truths, namely, not all people in a given society embrace us; and even our followers do not follow us in everything we claim. Today, we have critical fellowship. For example, Catholicism still officially bans condoms, most Catholics, however, don't. Apart from this negative aspect, what can be said positively?
- 2. Re-contextualize.** A religion offers an alternative “grand narrative.” Islam's grand narrative is that the only true God has sent messengers to humanity again and again—their message was distorted but re-established by Muhammad—now God's call to a new civilisation of responsibility can be lived out faithfully. Christianity's grand narrative is that human beings were created free and therefore with a tendency towards independence, thus able to separate themselves from the communion with God—this separation hinders flourishing life—but by sensing the Easter joy, humanity can freely take part in Jesus' communion with his heavenly father and thus live out of love.
- 3. Shape people's conscience.** Instead of using state power to safeguard a society's beliefs, inspiring religions can, in light of their grand narrative, form people's hearts. This happens by means of pastoral but also charitable, cultural, educational and scholarly institutions: especially by providing a model of true humanity, if they have an exemplary character; and also by supporting people in developing a well-grounded value system of their own.
- 4. Contribute to the 'spirit' of society.** “Inspiration” is an apt designation also because it does not only address individuals. Rather, the presence of religions can now, through top quality participation in societal processes,

support the formation of a country's culture, administration, economy and even legislation to become more humane. What, however, follows from such a high claim at religions' world shaping power for their relation to the state power?

- 5. Relativize the state.** A religious community that wants to be an inspiration for a society will not work *in order to* be seen; it will, rather, often act discretely (“salt of the earth”); but it needs to be also a visible community (“city on a hill”). Thus it can fulfil a task that non-religious stake-holders cannot perform. A truly inspiring religion has to understand its role toward state and society in a triple vocation, namely, as orientation, motivation, and critique. It is particular to religions to claim that the final judgment, the ultimate rule, the definitive decision comes not from the state but from God. Jesus' initial message was even that God's transformation of all human power is now arriving (“the kingdom of God is at hand”).

Conclusion

A religion taking its inspiring potential seriously will neither be a mere private affair nor a mere servant to state or society; rather, such a religion will see itself as their inspiring counterpart. It will neither claim to be the only possible source of grand narrative nor say that its message is identical with other orientations. It will attempt to be in dialogue with other religions, world-views and claims to shape the world. It will be ready to learn from others in mutual purification and enrichment. It will also be critical, even relativizing towards political claims at ultimate power. In so far, however, as state and society are open to such relativization, religions can endorse the state and motivate society. Then, a religious community is an orienting *vis a vis*: an inspiration.