

Religion after detraditionalization : Christian faith in a post-secular europe

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Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe

Detraditionalization, in combination with the category of pluralization, it is a conceptual framework to think anew the 'transformation of religion' in Europe. Subsequently the impact of this transformation on Christian faith and the appropriate theological response may be. Beyond mere faith and contemporary context, the main lines are 'theology of interruption', understood as both 'interrupting theology'.

...or as alive as some now maintain'.¹

...ions that touch upon the issue of Europe'.² The first concerns the dialogue with some European Values Study;³ but, what do we mean by the category of detraditionalization, offers a conceptual framework to think anew the 'transformation of religion' in Europe, and the challenges it poses to Christian Churches and Christian theological reflection.

In this article, I will deal with two questions. In the first part, I will sketch an analysis of the current religious situation of Europe, based on observations by sociologists of religion on the European continent. When we assert that the current context is post-secular, then in relation to this situation, I will suggest that the category of detraditionalization, in combination with the category of pluralization, offers a conceptual framework to think anew the 'transformation of religion' in Europe, and the challenges it poses to Christian Churches and Christian theological reflection. In the second part, I will take up this challenge for theology and investigate how and under what conditions theology can relate to this so-called post-secular context, marked by detraditionalization and pluralization. In this regard, my principal research question is not about what religion could offer to contemporary democratic societies, but what, alternatively, the impact is of the transformation of religion in Europe on Christian faith, and what the appropriate theological response may be. My approach here is cultural-theological, with an explicit theological-epistemological interest. Reflecting on how theology can serve Christian faith in the current context will lead us to the question of what kind of theology can perform this service. To answer this latter question, I will sketch

¹ Lambert, 'A Turning Point in Religious Evolution in Europe', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19(1) (2004) 29-45; here p. 44.

² This is the issue that is at stake in the Research Network: 'The New Visibility of European Democratic Culture', convened by G. Ward and M. Hoebel (Manchester) and sponsored by the British Academy. This text is an elaboration of a contribution I made to its first meeting (Manchester, 18-20 March, 2004).

³ This is an empirical research programme which, since the beginning of the eighties, has investigated the religious, cultural, social, and individual values of the diverse European populations – cf. *infra*.

Religion Christian

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the main lines of what I would frame as a 'theology of interruption', understood as both 'interrupted theology' as well as 'interrupting theology'.

A. Analysing the religious situation of Europe

I will start this first part with some methodological comments on the notion of the 'post-secular'. Afterwards, with an eye to what sociologists of religion might contribute to our discussion, I will suggest analysing the current context in terms of detraditionalization and pluralization. I will conclude this part with some observations that point to the challenges the transformation of religion poses to theology.

1. A post-secular Europe?

Defining the current European religious situation as 'post-secular' in one way or another relates this situation to the secularization process. As far as Europe is concerned, the so-called secularization thesis would explain the gradually diminishing impact, both individually and socially, of the Christian tradition. On the basis of the presumption of the so-called zero-sum-theory, this thesis holds that modernization consists of a process that excludes religion from modern society and culture. In short, the sum of modernization and religion is always zero: the more religion, the less modernization, and especially the reverse: the more modernization, the less religion. Once the secularization process is completed, a secular Europe will be realized, a Europe in which religion no longer plays a role in the construction and legitimation of individual and social identities.

In this regard, using the category 'post-secular' could imply at least two meanings. It could, from a *chronological* perspective, be an attempt to describe how the evolution from a pre-modern overall Christian context to a present day modern secular society is continued in the evolution from a secular to a post-modern, post-secular society. However, the term 'post-secular' can also hint at a *methodological* issue with regard to the secularization thesis itself, and thus refer to the way in which the religious transformations in Europe have been analysed and explained. In other words, using the term 'post-secular' has to do with the discussion of whether the term refers to a historical description of the process from pre-modern to post-modern, which changed religion in Europe (the facts), or to the way in which we analyse these changes (i.e. the history of our ways to describe this process – our *view* of the facts – at least to those among us for which this distinction still holds).

On the basis of a changed methodological perspective, we could reflect on the way in which religion in contemporary Europe contributes, or could contribute, to the identity construction and legitimation patterns of individuals and societies. We could think of regenerating old ways or constructing new ways to do so; we could reflect on the necessary conditions concerning religious identity in view of religious plurality,

interreligious communication and so on. However, especially from the point of view of the theologian, an adequate analysis of the current religious situation as 'post-secular' is also of major importance to the way in which Christian thinkers perceive their faith and its relation to the contemporary context, both in terms of the individual believer and the believing communities, that is, the Churches. Implied here is not only its impact on a reflection in terms of a Christian strategy *ad extra*, but also the pressure of the current religious situation on their own traditions, practices and institutions, and on the way in which this pressure is dealt with in contemporary theological reflection.

2. *The detraditionalization of Europe*

i. *'Desecularization' and the religious transformation of Europe*

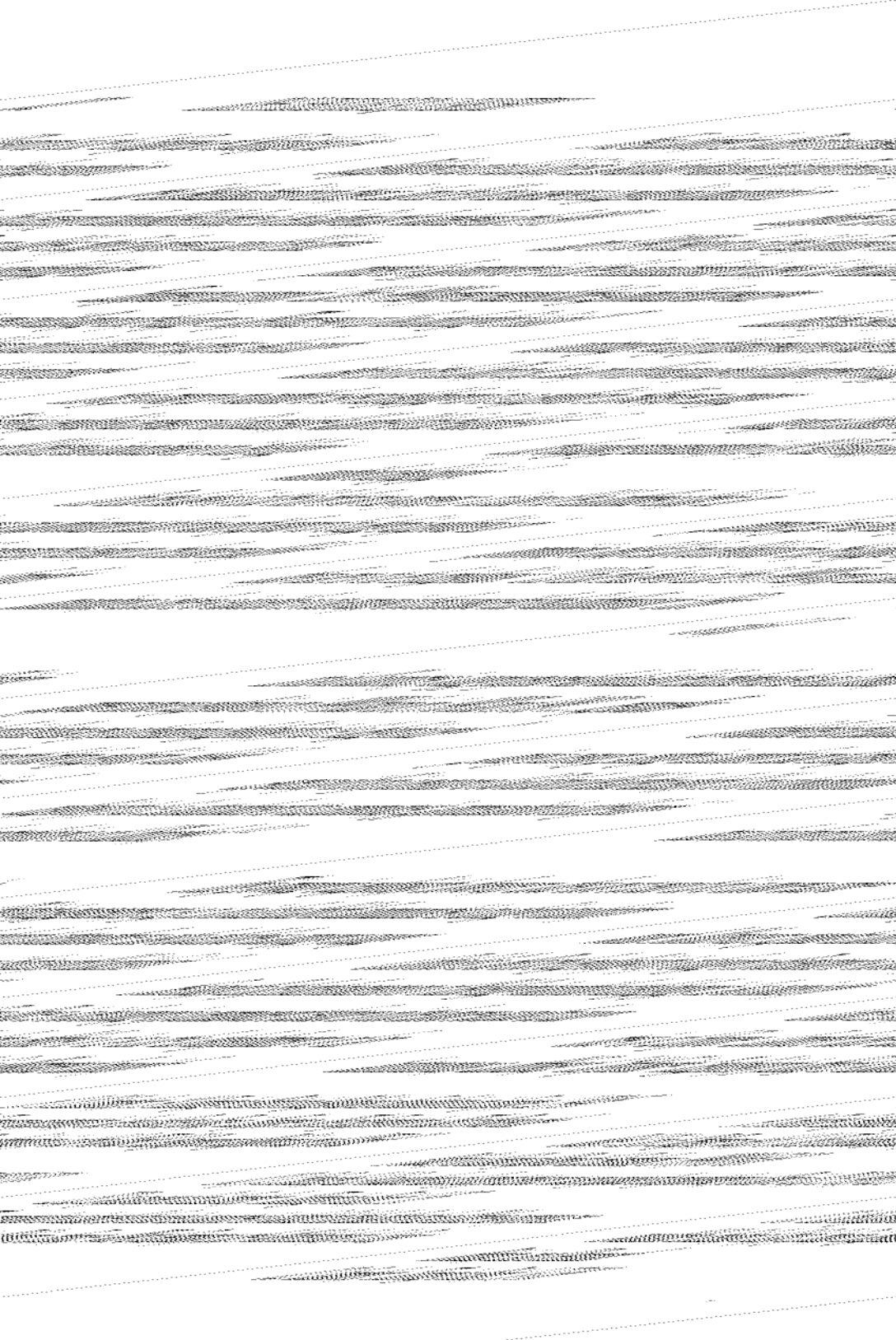
The secularization thesis, including the 'zero-sum-theory', has today been placed under serious doubt, for example by Peter Berger and Harvey Cox, two of its former protagonists. Religion did survive modernization. For Cox, secularization is even the myth of the twentieth century, prophesying 'the final disappearance of religion, ignorance and superstition'.⁴ Religion is alive and well in a hyper-modernized Japan; there is the enormous growth of Pentecostals and the rapid spread of Islam due to an Islamic resurgence. However, it would seem that Europe is the exception to the 'desecularization thesis'.⁵ There can be no doubt that a significant number of Europeans have left and are still leaving the Christian Churches, first in the Northern Protestant countries of Western Europe and, in more recent years, in the Catholic South as well. Berger refers here to the emergence of a 'massively secular Euro-culture'. Nevertheless, together with European sociologists of religion, he wonders whether 'secularization' is an appropriate term to analyse and define the European situation: 'a body of data indicates strong survivals of religion, most of it generally Christian in nature, despite the widespread alienation from the organized Churches. A shift in the institutional location of religion, then, rather than secularization, would be a more accurate description of the European situation.'⁶ Cox arrives at an analogous question, also with an explicit reference to Christianity: 'Could Christianity in Europe be moving away from an institutionally positioned model and towards a cultural diffuse pattern, more like the religions in many Asian countries, and therefore more difficult to measure by such standard means as church attendance and baptism statistics?'⁷ Modernization in Europe has caused a *transformation of religion*, not its disappearance.

4. H. Cox, 'The Myth of the Twentieth Century. The Rise and Fall of Secularization', in G. Baum, (ed.), *The Twentieth Century. A Theological Overview* (New York: Orbis, 1999) 135-143, here p. 135.

5. Cf. P. Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview', in id. (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 1-18, here pp. 10-11; Cox, *The Myth*, 136-139.

6. Berger, *The Desecularization*, 10.

7. Cox, *The Myth*, 139.



through variables which are less typically Christian':¹³ the importance of meditation and contemplation; belief in a higher power, spirit or force, rather than a personal God; belief in life after death (including reincarnation); an interest in different religious traditions rather than in one particular tradition. In general, this group claims to be in search of spirituality (rather than 'religion'). Thirdly, according to the data, the young who have never belonged to any religion seem to be a new category. A vast majority (62%) of those who state they do not presently belong to a religion have, in addition, never belonged to one.

Lambert thus concludes that there has indeed been a religious mutation in Europe, which would make Europe a little bit less of an exception (but only slightly less so). When asked for his interpretation, Lambert ventures 'a kind of return in the swing of the pendulum following the phase of the great religious breakdown, the permissive thrust, and the ideological radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s.'¹⁴ The younger generation would seem to attach new importance to more traditional values as faithfulness, social order, and so on. The exceptions here are the ethical items which affect the private self-determination, as for example, the use of soft drugs, abortion and euthanasia, homosexuality, suicide, and so on. There are indications for a selective re-activation of traditions and a new openness to religion. In this regard, some remarks of Lambert are important, as they seem to point to what is at the basis of the resurgent religiosity in Europe. (1) As regards the stronger belief in life after death, Lambert suggests that this may have been influenced by the 'over-valuation of self-realization which might have made death even more unacceptable'. (2) Secondly, the openness to religion holds true 'to the extent to which its role is from now on non-authoritarian ... It can find new credibility as a source of meaning, ethics, sociability, identity, faith, or as an autonomous quest.' (3) 'On the other hand, religion is relativized, passed through the filter of individual subjectivity, confronted by indifference or the autonomous spiritual quest.' And he continues: 'This is what I call "pluralistic secularization", which, in Western Europe, tends slightly to de-secularize the most laicist countries (for example, France) and, on the other hand, to further secularize the most confessional ones (for example, Sweden).'¹⁵ He thus concludes his article: 'In Europe, God is neither as dead nor as alive as some now maintain.'¹⁶

ii. *From 'secularization' to 'detraditionalization' and 'individualization'*

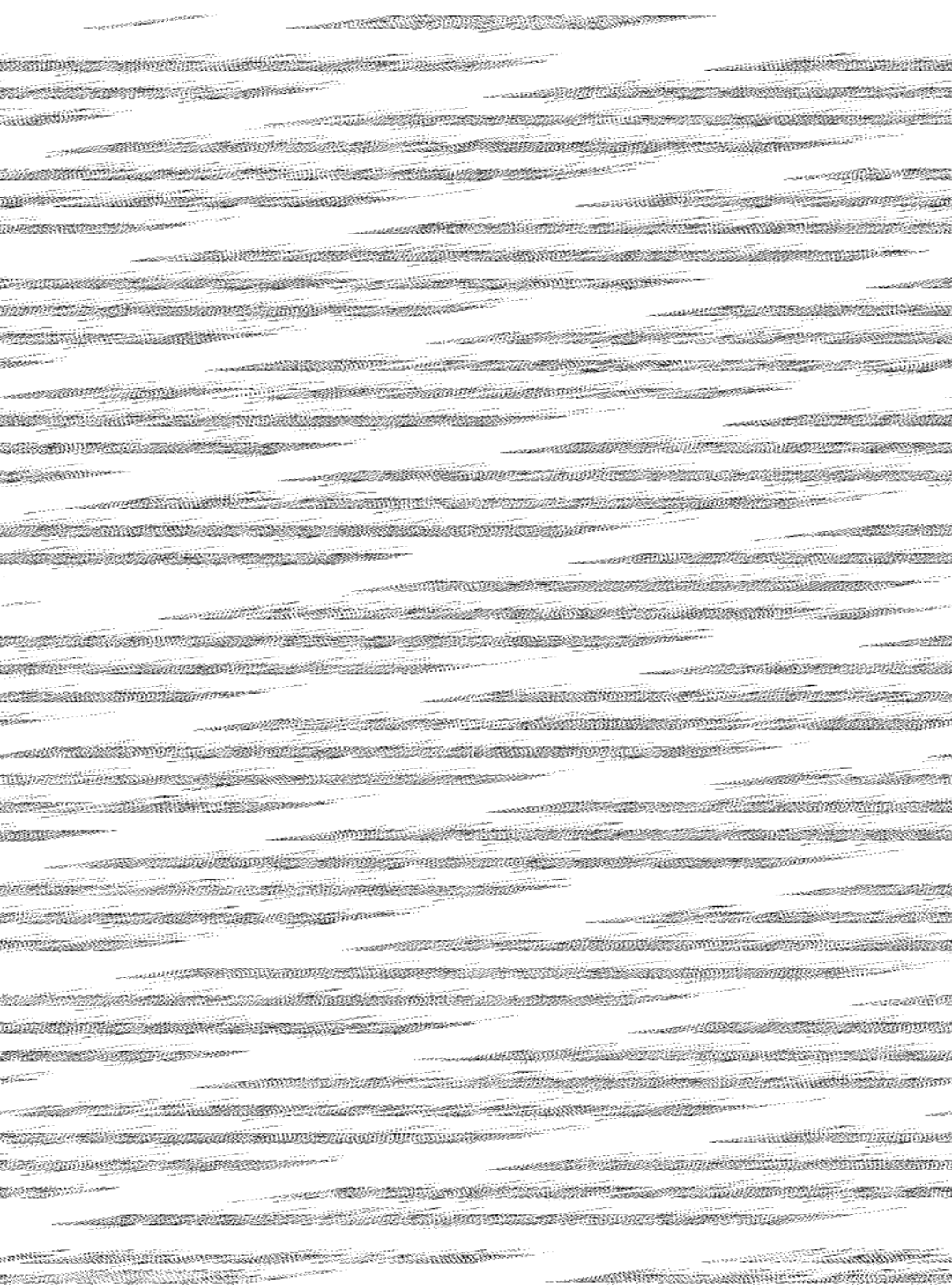
The language used to deal with the religious situation in Europe requires further reflection, especially as regards the use of the categories of 'religion' and 'believing without belonging'. 'Religion' in the first place seems to refer to classical, traditional religion (most often even

13. Lambert, 'Turning Point', 38.

14. Lambert, 'Turning Point', 42.

15. Lambert, 'Turning Point', 43.

16. Lambert, 'Turning Point', 44.



unquestioned and quasi-automatic transmission of tradition, identity is no longer given but has to be constructed.

It must be clear by now that detraditionalization is understood as a descriptive category, indicating the socio-cultural developments that have influenced Europe in modern times. In this regard, detraditionalization is not only a feature of post-Christians, but affects all religious and ideological affiliations. All of them in one way or another have to deal with this changed socio-cultural reality.

In this regard, detraditionalization is the flip side of individualization.¹⁸ On the structural level, every individual is charged with the task of constructing his or her personal identity. Traditions no longer automatically steer this construction process, but are only possibilities together with other choices from which an individual must choose. In other words, personal identity has become more and more (structurally) reflexive. For each choice made, there are alternatives in relation to which it can either be questioned or argued for. Even the relation to tradition has changed and has become more reflexive due to the fact that those who choose traditional religions are all too aware of the fact that they do not have to choose this. Of course, other (cultural) instances and processes besides the classical tradition make attempts to steer the identity construction both individually and socially; for example, two of the most important influences are the media and the economization of the lifeworld.¹⁹

3. *The pluralization of religion in Europe*

However, our focus on the interpretation of the EVS-data might make us forget another important feature, that is, the pluralization of 'religion', which goes much further than Lambert's 'pluralistic secularization'. The religious plurality of our days exceeds the plurality resulting from the 'pluralistic secularization', however widespread and important that phenomenon may be. Indeed, one of the important shortcomings of the European Values Study is its under-representation of other (world) religions, even Islam.²⁰ Furthermore, the data in question are the EVS-survey about other religions, which focuses mainly on the way in which Christians and 'post-Christians' perceive other religions.²¹

18. Individualization as a cultural trend, and thus as a descriptive category, ought to be strictly distinguished from individualism as an ideology, from egoism as a moral qualification and so forth. In addition, individualization should not be indiscriminately identified with 'becoming more of an individual', i.e. the acquisition of a personal identity (individualization as a psychological mechanism).

19. For this paragraph, see my *Interrupting Tradition. An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Leuven: Peeters/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) ch. 3 and 4.

20. Cf. Lambert, 'Turning Point', 30. 'At least 15 million people in Western Europe adhere to the Muslim faith or have close cultural ties or affiliations with the Islamic world. In the course of a few decades, Islam has emerged as Europe's second religion after Christianity.'; see also S.T. Hunter, *Islam, Europe's Second Religion: The New Social, Cultural, and Political Landscape* (Westport (Conn.): Praeger/CSIS, 2002).

21. Those who consider themselves Christians, Lambert comments, show 'a kind of positive relativism towards religion and at least an open-minded attitude' ('Turning Point', 41).

The religious reality, however, is far more complex. In a contribution, 'Serving God in Brussels' (1995), Johan Leman, an anthropologist in Leuven, Belgium, portrays the different forms of religious affiliation in metropolitan Brussels.²² He first mentions the diversity of Christian Churches and communities (autochthon and other): Catholic, Protestant of different denominations, Anglican, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, and the many Christian sects (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses), which can often be distinguished further on a social and regional basis. As far as the autochthones are concerned, Jews too are a recognizable group, and a lot of middle class people show a craving for forms of Far-Eastern spiritualities. Allochthones most often are of Buddhist and especially Muslim descent, and differ according to regional origin. Their residence often leads to an accommodation of their religious views and practices towards the Belgian contexts, although a reaction against such accommodation is also manifested, resulting in diverse fundamentalisms.

Indeed, geographic as well as mental mobility have brought the plural world of religions onto our doorstep. Migration, tourism, and the communication media have confronted those developing a 'religiosity without belonging' as well as those committed to a classic religious tradition with religious diversity. For the former, religious plurality presents the manifold ways in which human beings can construct their religious identities. Often the many religious traditions are conceived of as reservoirs of narratives, rituals, practices, worldviews, etc. from which one can choose in order to construct one's religious identity. For the latter, the tangible confrontation with religious otherness leads many of them to a reflection on their own religious identity and truth claims, which often seems to result in a theological-pluralist position of theological truth.²³ Therefore, in addition to detraditionalization, pluralization may also be used as a tool to analyse the current context. The following considerations would support this suggestion:

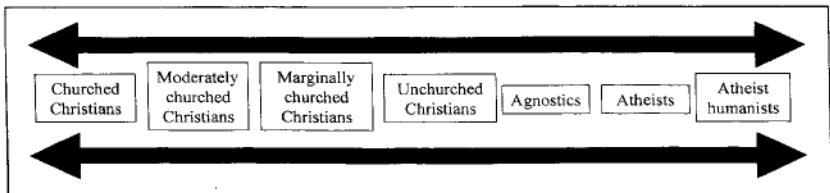
(a) First, the consciousness of the reality of religious plurality has an impact on the detraditionalization process that is occurring in European societies. Three elements are worth mentioning in this regard. First, it further relativizes the (until recently) unquestioned monopoly position of Christianity in answering questions of meaning and value. Secondly, the consciousness of religious plurality feeds the intuition of a general religiosity, constitutive for being a human person as such (the idea of the *homo religiosus*, human beings being incurably religious), of which particular traditions are then particular examples or manifestations. Finally, religious plurality is both the outcome and the engine of Lambert's

22. See J. Leman, 'God dienen te Brussel. Een onderhuids tapijt van los aaneenhangende knopen', *Kultuurleven* 62/7 (1995) 32-39.

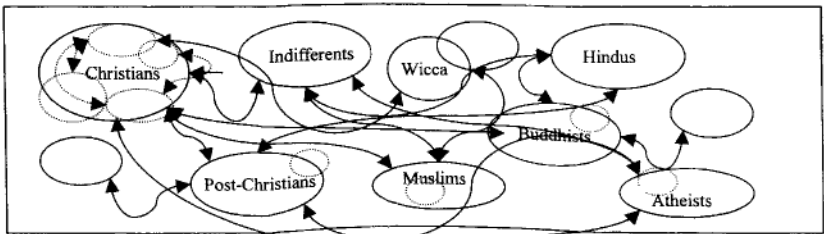
23. Theological pluralism, in general, tends to relativize the particularity of the different religions on the basis of a unitary view based on some original or universal religious experience, attitude or conception, which is (at least implicitly) common to all human beings, and of which particular religions are exemplars or interpretations.

'pluralistic secularization'. To construct their religious identities, individuals use (fragments from) old and new religious traditions, which have been loosened from their original traditional connection. In this regard, one could speak of a religious market situation in which established Churches and religions, as well as new religious movements and trends, are caught up in the game of supply and demand. In so doing, the idea of 'tradition' itself, as a given into which people initiate themselves in order to receive their identity rather than constructing it, becomes lost.

(b) In combination with detraditionalization, the category of pluralization of religion also refers to the fact that the outcome of modernization is not a secular society without religion, a kind of 'euro-secularism',²⁴ but a dynamic multi-religious society, full of complexity and ambiguity, in which many new religious movements and stances are present. As a consequence, this also implies that the rather classic analysis of the religious situation in European societies in terms of a continuum between 'churched Christian' and 'professing atheist humanists' is far too simplistic a reflection of the current state, even if one would substitute the 'post-Christian', or 'pluralistic secularist' position, for the atheist stance. Aside from this, one may remark that a lot of sociological research still conceives of its instruments within such continuum-thinking, as well as a lot of pastoral-theological strategies.



More adequate is an analysis in terms of a plural field of interacting religious positions, among which the diversity of individual religious constructs, the more vague religiosity, but also nihilism and religious indifference, are distinct positions, to be distinguished in their own right, next to the variety of classical religious traditions. Christianity has not been replaced by a secular culture, but a plurality of life views and religions have moved in to occupy the vacant space it left behind as result of its diminishing impact.



24. In line with what Berger called 'a massively secular Euro-culture' (see *The Desecularization*, 10).

4. *Conclusions and Theological Questions*

One can indeed legitimately qualify the current European religious situation as post-secular. Secularization in this regard did not lead to a secular culture, but to a transformation of religion in Europe through which the classical Christian tradition has lost its overall and pre-given unquestioned position. Because of detraditionalization, the impact of the Christian tradition on meaning and social life has faded away and, together with the growing consciousness of religious plurality and migration, this has led to a complex and ambiguous situation of religious diversity. In addition to groups belonging in varying degrees to more classic religious traditions, a significant amount of people can be qualified as post-Christians, religious individualists, for whom religion no longer has a link to being initiated in a religious tradition anterior to one's identity, but is the way one deals with a kind of basic religiosity, attached to contingency experiences, etc. Religion then can turn either into a vague religiosity – a kind of 'something-ism': 'there is something more' – or a vivid and profuse 'off-piste' religious imagination, which gives rise to new religious movements borrowing from Eastern religions, the renaissance of ancient Celtic religion, different kinds of syncretisms, etc. At least two kinds of questions are here important for me:

(a) No doubt, this new religious situation in Europe necessitates a new broad cultural reflection on the role of religion in Europe, first as regards the formation of both individual and social identities, and secondly, as concerns the discussion on the future of Europe. In this respect, the so-called Böckenförde-paradox, that European democracies consume their ideological (re)sources without being able to substantially renew them, can be an interesting point of departure.²⁵ Does religion possess a critical consciousness that is able to refuel European civil society? And if so, what kind of religion (if the classical religions, under what form)? Or does 'religiosity without tradition', one of the products of the process of detraditionalization, qualify as well?

(b) The detraditionalization and pluralization of religion in Europe bears important consequences for the institutional religions of Europe, and for Christianity in particular. These two processes not only inverted the privileged status of Christianity in Europe, but also affected contemporary Christian believers and communities, those (still) belonging to the Churches, albeit in varying degrees. Detraditionalization also changes the way in which Christians relate to the Christian tradition. Since, on the cultural level, there is no longer a necessity in being a Christian, contemporary Christians – structurally speaking – choose to be a Christian, whether or not they live out their faith option as being chosen, or being called. As with all identity formation, Christian identity has also become

25. Cf. E.-W. Böckenförde, *Recht, Staat, Freiheit: Studien zur Rechtsphilosophie, Staatstheorie und Verfassungsgeschichte* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) 112; see also, e.g. J.-B. Metz, *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie: 1967-97* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1997) 138, 180-181.

entially reflexive, and the option to be a Christian has been individualized. The pluralization of religion only reinforces this reflexive potential. On the one hand, this structural change leads some to seriously relativize links to the Christian tradition (especially its claim to anteriority), leading them to marginally Christian and even post-Christian positions. On the other hand, some feel extremely uncomfortable with this reflexivity, and turn to more traditionalist and fundamentalist positions, striving to restore the bond between social and individual identity and the link with the past. Their appeal to a 'pure' tradition, a tradition which never historically existed, however, also jeopardizes the very concept of tradition, both in its active and passive dimensions. What are these two opposing reactions to the same process, and how are there ways to productively engage with them? Or does this structural reflexivity in theological reflections on what it is to be a Christian in a pluralized society? Or does this structural reflexivity indeed automatically lead to a loss of 'belonging' and its counterpart in traditionalism? From a Christian-theological perspective, one cannot respond to the first question without formulating an answer to the second question implicitly conditions the response to the first. Indeed, both detraditionalization and pluralization pose a forward urgent challenge for a contemporary theological reflection.

B. Christian faith in a post-secular Europe

In this second part, focussing on what I call the challenge of post-secular Christianity for Christian theology, I will first develop in what way for some theologians the transformation of religion has an immediate and far-reaching impact on Christian faith and theology. In this regard, I will refer to what some have coined 'something-ism' and to a theological positive appreciation thereof. I will suggest that a lot of post-Christian religiosity has to do with uneasiness with Christian faith, as regards to both the elements of 'Christian particularity' and 'faith as a response to God who interrupts history'. Therefore, I will not side with those who affirm that the transformation of religion invites Christianity to adapt to this situation, engaging in an evacuation of Christian particularity and reconceptualizing the structure and dynamics of faith, fostering religious attitudes to an unknown God, an ineffable power, all too culturally holistic for some, or all too transcendently distant for others.²⁶ I will also not align myself with those who would argue for a cultural apophaticism, which does not do away with particularity but qualifies it in view of the God it testifies to: cf. L. Boeve, 'The Challenge for Contemporary Theology', in F. Bakker (ed.), *Christianity for the 21st Century* (FS Houtepena, Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004) 79-92.

theological remedy for the whole of post-secular Europe, distinguishing strongly between perspectiveless modern secularism and post-modern nihilism on one side, and the resources of theological rationalities on the other. On the basis of a radical-hermeneutical theological account, I hope to show that recontextualizing theology in a post-secular context neither leads to adaptation nor to mere opposition, but offers opportunities to profile Christian faith anew, both for contemporary believers (*ad intra*), as well as in the public forum (*ad extra*). In order to make my point, I will introduce the category of interruption, to both think of the relation between Christian faith and the contemporary context, as well as to think of God's engagement in our histories.

1. *The transformation of religion = the transformation of Christianity?*

The processes of detraditionalization and pluralization seem to foster the development of a vague religiosity which does away with some particular beliefs of Christian faith and is open to other ways of being expressed. A good example of this is the belief in a personal God: only one-fifth to one-third of the Western European population still holds to this belief, in almost all cases outnumbered by those believing in God as a spirit or life force. The least one can say is that the word 'God' has become polysemic in character, and that a univocal horizon of signification is no longer a given. Another belief under pressure is the belief in life after death: although roughly half of the Western European population still holds to it, in the way in which this belief is thought of, resurrection faces serious competition with reincarnation.²⁷ Such an evacuation of specific Christian beliefs, but also of the specific meaning of Christian rituals and practices, is not only visible among those who have taken leave of Christianity, but manifests itself within the Christian Churches as well; and this to such a degree that one can speak of a kind of cultural apophatistical attitude or tendency.

In *Streven*, a cultural review sponsored by the Flemish Jesuits, S. W. Couwenberg, pleads for an appreciation of what he calls 'something-ism' (*ietsisme*), the rather vague religious consciousness which would be a relic of the grand religious narratives of the past. 'For the unfathomable of our existence is often currently referred to as something which exceeds our comprehension but which nevertheless is there, or should be there, if the life in which we share for a short time is not destined to collapse into meaninglessness.'²⁸ Couwenberg also mentions that it is especially atheists who have problems with this 'poor', 'abstract', 'fashionable', but also 'irritating' (because 'superficial' and 'inauthentic') phenomenon. They ask why 'something-ists', when distancing themselves from traditional

27. L. Halman, *The European Values Study: A Third Wave. Source book of the 1999/2000 European Values Study Surveys* (EVS/WORC/Tilburg University, 2001) resp. p. 94, 87 and 92.

28. S.W. Couwenberg, 'Onttovering van het geloof en het "ietsisme" als eigentijdse uiting van religieus verlangen', *Streven* (Jan. 2004) 10-20, here p. 11 (translation mine).

religious orthodoxies, do not turn into 'nothing-ists,' cured of religion, something which one, according to them, in all fairness would expect.²⁹ Couwenberg would concede that this religiosity can indeed be qualified in some instances as superficial, but does not accept that it would be inauthentic. This religiosity is not an infantile waste product of contemporary culture, Couwenberg affirms, but a new shape of human-consciousness, indeed the result of a religious transformation (which, with respect to the criticisms of atheists, indeed implies a disenchantment with secular rationality and utopias). The contingency and meaninglessness of their existence, the emptiness of religiosity, with special attention to personal experiences and responsibility, while being averse to traditional orthodox religions. It is the expression of a hope that there is more to life than what

Borgman for instance, a disciple of his master's theological transformation of religion in the transformation or metamorphosis (cf.³¹), namely, the new God receives the current situation as revealed in a new manner. This sets that it is God's new agenda, which is a new theological agenda for theologians, since Borgman thinks it is theologically possible to affirm that in the metamorphosis of religion transforms Godself, and invites us, in our turn, to transform ourselves. 'A new image of God emerges'; and our situation, as a religious situation, 'throws a [new] light on the Christian tradition, in the same way as it has occurred in the past'.³⁶ In this regard, he pleads for a theology which strives at laying bare the traces of God, of 'divine Presence', in the multifaceted religiosity of our times, which also, according to Borgman, lives from the paradox that human beings are all too aware that they are themselves responsible for their identity and life, but at the same time, that

29. Reference is made to Dutch atheist publicists and scientists such as R. Bodelier, P. Niteus, H. den Boef, R. Koussbroek, and R. Plaskerk.

30. See, e.g., E. Borgman, *Edward Schillebeeckx: A Theologian in His History*, vol. 1: *A Public Theology of Culture (1914-1965)*, trans. J. Bowden (London/New York: Continuum, 2003).

31. On another occasion, I have argued that Borgman undertakes only half the radicalization of Schillebeeckx's project: cf. L. Boeve, 'Zeg nooit meer correlatie. Over christelijke laagse context en onderbreking', *Collanimes* 33 (2004) 193-219.

32. Cf. E. Borgman, 'Gods gedaanteverandering. De metamorfosen van de religie en hun betekenis', *Tijdschrift voor theologie* 44 (2004) 45-66.

33. *Mant. 17:2*, *Mant. 9:2*, 'Gedaanteverandering', 51 (translation mine), 'Gedaanteverandering', 52 (translation mine), 'Gedaanteverandering', 58 (translation mine).

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som...
Couwe...
in many...
inauthentic...
porary secular...
ity's religious...
transformation (wh...
implies a disenchant...
Confronted with the con...
people develop a new type o...
experiences and responsibility...
religions. It is the expression of a...
temporary context, of the hope th...
scientific world views maintain.

For some Christian theologians, Erik...
of Edward Schillebeeckx³⁰ and radicalized...
approach,³¹ this new situation (i.e. the trans...
Europe) should be theologially interpreted as...
metamorphosis of God³² (the 'transfiguration' of God...
way in which God relates to history and society. He per...
situation as 'a fresh religious situation, in which the holy...
new manner. Precisely this is what the changed forms of relig...
giosity, which once again arouse a lot of interest, make visible...
a new theological agenda for theologians, since Borgman thinks...
theologically possible to affirm that in the metamorphosis of religion...
transforms Godself, and invites us, in our turn, to transform ourselves...
'A new image of God emerges'; and our situation, as a religious situation...
'throws a [new] light on the Christian tradition, in the same way as it has...
occurred in the past'.³⁶ In this regard, he pleads for a theology which...
strives at laying bare the traces of God, of 'divine Presence', in the multi...
faceted religiosity of our times, which also, according to Borgman, lives...
from the paradox that human beings are all too aware that they are them...
selves responsible for their identity and life, but at the same time, that

34. Borgman, *Gods gedaanteverandering*, 51 (translation mine).

35. Borgman, *Gods gedaanteverandering*, 52 (translation mine).

36. Borgman, *Gods gedaanteverandering*, 58 (translation mine).

this responsibility overtakes them, and that meaning and happiness are rather given than constructed.³⁷ The current confusion about religion should therefore be considered the birthplace of new insights. For Borgman, Victor Turner's concept of liminality offers perspectives to refocus the critical potential of this religiosity in terms of what questions and suspends established order and structures so as to enable the coming into existence of new life and community. However, 'to meet God, not where God indisputably is, but is still to be expected, where God's coming is kept open: it presupposes a narrative with the message that God as the salvation of the world is irrevocably related to the world and is still coming.'³⁸ It is at this point that a religious narrative can again become important, because much of contemporary religiosity often seems to reflect the problematic sides of modernity it bears witness to. However, adds Borgman, the return to religious traditions and narratives often deteriorates into neo-traditionalism, that is, finding comfort in nostalgia for a past which never existed.

It would seem to me that Borgman's resolutely positive (cultural and theological) appreciation of the transformation of religion in post-secular Europe is not unproblematic, especially when one looks at the last part of his text. There he himself points (very shortly and only in passing) to the very ambiguous character of the new religiosity, mirroring the crisis of the modern self to which it is a reaction.³⁹ He indicates the importance of a 'substantial (Dutch: *inhoudelijk*)⁴⁰ religious narrative', in the context of which he sees new possibilities for the Christian narrative, for basic Christian convictions, to become relevant once again. I do not oppose this last suggestion, especially not when this basic Christian stance is defined as the conviction 'that God is near to us, not where he is indisputably present, but where he in all vulnerability is expected, and in fear and trembling is hoped for.' The question for me, however, is how such a Christian narrative can be profiled today in the midst of the 'religious confusion'. What are the traces of God, and how are they to be found, on what grounds, if not by people who precisely do not fall prey to this kind of religiosity? What is under-reflected here, I would argue, is the question of faith. Borgman, along with others, too easily assumes that a lot of this new religiosity is 'believing without belonging' which, when properly understood, can then be considered as the way in which God would relate to contemporary people. However, in what way does the substantial Christian narrative asked for resurge from today's cultural (post-Christian) religiosity? What is the theological-epistemological method being used to perceive the link between contemporary context and

37. Borgman, 'Gods gedaanteverandering', 57.

38. Borgman, 'Gods gedaanteverandering', 64 (translation mine).

39. Borgman, 'Gods gedaanteverandering', 63.

40. English translation: 'as regards content', 'with a specific content.'

Christian narrative (defined then as the Christian tradition as it can be relevant for today)? Is it too obvious to see post-Christian religiosity in such continuity with Christian faith? Is it not better, as some others would do, to stress the discontinuity between the two?

I fear – perhaps contrary to Borgman's own intuitions – is that the attempt to link too rapidly a positive appreciation of post-Christian religiosity with the way in which Christian faith again can become plausible through the evacuation of Christian particularity and diffuses the attempt to say what faith is about. In this regard, it would seem that Borgman's theology is still subject to a modernist correlationist approach, stressing the continuity between context and Christianity, in order to co-relate God to the world. As I have developed elsewhere,⁴¹ such a method only plausibly and relevantly works when there is still a substantial factual overlap between (secularizing) culture and Christianity, constituting the horizon in which Christian faith is correlated with modern, secular culture. Moreover, correlation was worked out following the epistemological standards of the context (although in most cases criticized when they became exclusive of religion and determining a position 'secularist' instead of 'secular').

The major result of this dialogue with modernity was that the theological construction of meaning could be claimed as founded in the issue of the subject's individual and social existence, to which theology had access precisely through philosophy and the sciences.

This fundamental presumption of continuity, however, can be criticized from two perspectives. First of all (and this has become obvious in the first part of this contribution), due to detraditionalization, this factual overlap does not exist anymore, and what is more, because of pluralization one can even question whether theology's dialogue with the context is still to be conceived of as between two partners needing to be correlated. Rather, theology is immersed in a complex, dynamic, irreducible, and often conflicting plurality of religions, world and life views. Secondly, and at the same time, the modern epistemological standards (universality, transparency, and communicability) have been critiqued by much post-modern thinking. Since the 1980s post-modern sensibilities have questioned some basic presumptions of modern secular culture, calling for more attention to heterogeneity and radical historicity. Having learned from the lessons of twentieth century history, they have become suspicious of totalizing frameworks and call attention to the limits, contextuality, and contingency of any construction of meaning. They give rise to thinking patterns that start from a sensitivity to otherness and

41. Cf. my *Zeg nooit* (Never Correlate), and my *Beyond Correlation Strategies: Teaching Religion in a De-traditionalized and Pluralized Context: A Playground for Socio-cultural Hermeneutics* in D. Pellegrin & H. Lombaerts, (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Religious Education* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2004) 233-254.

41. Cf. my *Zeg nooit* (Never Correlate), and my *Beyond Correlation Strategies: Teaching Religion in a De-traditionalized and Pluralized Context: A Playground for Socio-cultural Hermeneutics* in D. Pellegrin & H. Lombaerts, (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Religious Education* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2004) 233-254.

difference, and remain aware of the ever-persisting danger of the hegemonic closing of our ways to deal with them. It is from such a perspective that in contemporary philosophy and the human sciences reflections are developed that criticize easy ways of presuming an underlying or expected consensus and harmony, since such frameworks often imply implicit mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion.

In this regard, I suggest viewing the relation between Christian tradition and context in a way that does not presume this continuity too easily. For, in such a line of thinking, the continuum to which I referred to in the first part (i.e. the continuum between active churched Christians and atheist humanists on which all religious positions are to be situated) still functions, and invites theologians to speak to all and, what is worse, for all. Instead of atheist or agnostic partners as the exponents of a secular culture, nowadays post-Christian religiosity would then be the partner by whom Christianity is challenged to testify to its own legitimacy, in showing its fundamental respect for this religiosity on the one hand, and most often its surplus-value on the other. In my opinion, this is too straightforward an approach that only takes into account the analysis of the current context in terms of detraditionalization. Moreover, in relation to the second step, it is often hardly more than a Christianizing of this religiosity, which the latter can perfectly do without. It is, then, no surprise that Christian narrativity is perceived of as a narrative doubling of what can be said with at least as much or perhaps even more success in other vocabularies. Therefore, it would seem that correlationist theologies currently promote rather a relativizing of Christian faith than sketch new ways to adequately cope with it.

As already mentioned, I do not plead for a theology which starts from a complete discontinuity between Christian faith and context. Against those who would do this, I would affirm that it is to modern theology's credit that it made clear that there is indeed an intrinsic bond between Christian tradition and context, that the context is constitutive for tradition and tradition development, and that Christian faith is both culturally as well as theologically engaged in ongoing processes of recontextualization. As I hope to have shown elsewhere,⁴² and will now show in the remainder of my contribution, this is all the more true for a theology in a post-modern context. What I am arguing for is that this relation can no longer be thought of as a one-to-one relation against a background of continuity. On the contrary, I am convinced that when the aspect of pluralization is also taken into account, together with the renewed cultural sensibilities for particularity, contextuality, historicity, and contingency as well as otherness and difference, a recontextualization of Christian tradition may lead to a self-conscious and profiled Christian faith, open to dialogue and challenged by otherness.

42. See my *Interrupting Tradition*, ch. 1: 'Tradition and its Development.'

2. *Towards a radical hermeneutical theology of Christian particularity*

Our culture, marked as it is by detraditionalization and pluralization, thus seems to foster a kind of general religious attitude which evacuates elements of Christian vocabulary, practices and concepts because of their alienating and authoritarian, or dividing and conflicting, impulses. Everything that keeps people away from what really fulfils and constitutes identity, or what brings division and conflict instead of harmony and reconciliation, has to be cleaned out.

In this regard, I would suggest that a serious uneasiness about an extremely particular 'Christian' faith is vividly present: unease with a Christianity that is too literal, too narrative, too concrete, too historical – and therefore too determined, limiting, and seemingly therefore exclusivist, oppressive and alienating. Secondly, and related to this first point, this uneasiness also pertains to Christian 'faith', answering the appeal of the Other, revealed in this concrete history, contingency and particularity: the appeal of a God who both comes into history, and escapes it; moreover, it concerns a God who becomes all too particularly visible in one human being, a God of whom one can only speak in reference to concrete historical events, which from a theological perspective are then held to be definitive, unrepeatable, unique.

At the same time, this post-Christian resurgence of religion/religiosity in Europe bears witness to the post-modern uneasiness with secularism, modern rationality and emancipation. It reflects the decentring of the self-subsistent and autonomous subject, the consciousness of the limits of its knowing and mastery, and its longing for wholeness, harmony and reconciliation.

To reassess the position of Christian faith vis-à-vis the current European context I will also include 'pluralization' in my approach. As is the case with the reflexivity enabled by detraditionalization, the case of pluralization leads also to post-Christian religiosity. Religious plurality does indeed seem to lead many of our contemporaries into a kind of religious relativism, but at the same time it provokes strong reactions from religious individuals and communities accentuating their religious identities. Interreligious communication might also lead to a reconfirmation of religious identities, or at least to the urgent request to be taken seriously in one's identity.

The fact that it is not a secular context, but a context of detraditionalization and plurality in which Christian faith is situated today, places in question the identity of Christians and influences the way in which they enter into dialogue with the current culture and society, at the same time themselves a part of this culture and society. It calls for an adjustment in analysis, reflection and strategic approach. Therefore it is opportune to make a methodological distinction between an outside and an inside perspective with regard to the theologian's engagement, dialogue, or

communication with the current context.⁴³ On the one hand, there is the discovery *ad extra* of one's own Christian narrative particularity and, on the other hand, there is the examination *ad intra* of what the challenge of the new plural context in confrontation with other particularities means for the development of one's own particular narrativity.

i) *An outside perspective – the 'ad extra dimension' of our communication with the context*

There is first of all the relation with the detraditionalized and pluralized culture and society itself, both interpersonally (i.e. with persons and groups outside Christianity) and intrapersonally (i.e. in terms of our 'fragmented' selves). We can term this the *ad extra* dimension. The problem here is that Christians find communicating in the public forum what they stand for more difficult because the common presuppositions and language needed to do this are diminishing increasingly. More technically, the question posed here is that of the communicability of the particularity of the Christian narrative. The Christian experience of reality can only be adequately communicated to those who have a minimal familiarity with the Christian narrative or are at least prepared to become acquainted with it.

This has to do with a problem of language – language that is here under the influence of the 'linguistic turn', which very generally is understood as standing-in-the-world-linguistically. An example can serve to illustrate this: there is no experience of God without any concept or narrative about God, and further, there is no idea of what an experience of God could mean.⁴⁴ Religious experience cannot simply therefore be identified with experience of God (certainly if religious is understood etymologically, deriving from *religare*).⁴⁵

Paying greater attention to the irreducible particularity of the Christian narrative is one of the lessons gleaned from the encounter with the plurality of religions and fundamental life options. For the Christian narrative forms its own (to be sure, dynamic) symbolic space, its own hermeneutical horizon or circle. Becoming acquainted with Christianity is thus something like learning a language, a complex event that presumes grammar, vocabulary, formation of habits and competence as much as it does empathy.

But, some might wonder, can this communication not be facilitated (or even assumed) by the frequent structural analogies, sometimes even

43. For these paragraphs, see also L. Boeve, 'La pertinence de la foi chrétienne dans la société contemporaine: Entre sécularité et pluralité', in *ETL* 77 (2001) 441-455.

44. Cf. A. Vergote, *Het huis is nooit af. Gedachten over mens en religie* (Kapellen: De Nederlandsche boekhandel, 1974) 63; *Religie, geloof en ongelooft. Psychologische studie* (Antwerpen: Uitgeverij De Nederlandsche boekhandel, 1984) 113.

45. This is precisely the reason why the pluralistic theologian John Hick speaks no longer of God when he names the transcendent referent of the religions but uses 'the Real'. For more background information and comments, see T. Merrigan, 'Religious Knowledge in the Pluralist Theology of Religions', *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 686-707, esp. 695-696.

kinship relations, between the Christian faith and other fundamental life options? After all, they each maintain some kind of spirituality (which often includes an experience of and relation to something transcendent), advocate an ethics, hold ideas on the meaning of personal and social life, express their convictions in narratives and rituals, etc. What is more, some would call this a general or universal human substratum upon which the diversity of religions then build and furnish with their respective interpretations.

It is certainly the case that such indications of parallel structures can contribute to an understanding of that for which a specific religious position stands. But it can never replace that position's narrative 'thickness', for we are dealing with reflexive speech on a structural level, a thinking that recognizes the *a posteriori* structures in our narratives. However, human beings do not live from reflexive structures, but from narratives. Moreover, theories on what is universally human are often as contextual and particular as that which they investigate. To be sure, every theoretical reflection entails the taking of a distance, but this always proceeds from within an already being involved.

ii) *An inside perspective – the 'ad intra dimension' of our communication with culture and society*

In contradistinction to the *ad extra* dimension, we can also consider the relation with context from an inside perspective. The Christian narrative tradition is after all thoroughly contextual and recontextualizes itself through its linking with contemporary life and current contextual experiences. Already, in the past, shifts in culture and society have driven the Christian tradition towards recontextualization. Repeatedly this tradition has been placed under pressure by contextual newness and was challenged to a critical-creative recontextualization, sometimes even to such an extent that it thereby thoroughly changed. It is on this level that renewal of tradition takes shape.

A current example of this is the renewal in Christian narrative communities of faith language as an expression of a contemporary Christian experience of God, in which the relationship with God is no longer interpreted and thought of in purely patriarchal terms. For here too the confrontation with contextual newness can be considered a language problem: the old language is no longer able to adequately evoke the new experiences of faith. With recontextualization, the Christian narrative's own language game (or, as stated above, its own symbolic space, hermeneutical horizon or circle) begins to shift.

iii) *Problems with this methodological distinction*

One of the problems of the current pastoral, but also quite often theological, analysis is that both methodologically distinct dimensions are conflated. This mistake arises from the fact, firstly, that this methodological

distinction cannot always be made as sharply in practice,⁴⁶ and secondly, that in both cases, as indicated, problems of language are detected.

(1) The problem of searching for a new language *ad intra* owing to the altered experience of faith is often wrongly seen as the solution for the dimension *ad extra*. The fact that the Christian faith can no longer make itself understood in the public forum is then in the first instance to be attributed to the deficiency of contemporary contextually rooted faith language. For instance, this is especially the case today with regard to communicating the special place of Jesus Christ for the interpretation of the Christian relationship with God. The same difficulty occurs when clarifying what hope means for Christians. Another example is explaining the credibility and relevance of the Christian sacramental praxis.

The presumption behind this position is that the Christian faith has alienated itself from the culture – frequently because of its traditionalistic and institutional rigidity – and must (and thus also can) make a return move on its own. Underlying this is apparently also the idea that herein lies the reason for the massive exodus from the Church in recent decades. Another presumption is that each person is at least open towards a Christian interpretation of life and coexistence if only this were presented well enough – a sort of unproblematic inclusivism.

Now, it is certainly true that a tradition which refuses to recontextualize itself radically problematizes its survival, even mortgages it. It is however a misconception to think that recontextualization would solve the whole communication problem let alone that it should (once more) convince non/ex-Christians (or not-yet Christians) of the validity of the Christian narrative.

(2) The reverse instance of looking to the *ad extra* dimension when faced with *ad intra* problems is not uncommon either. Questions pressing for recontextualization, for instance, access to the priesthood, or family ethics (but also with respect to the examples given earlier: the uniqueness of Christ, the Christian hope, the sacramental praxis) are not infrequently replied to by referring to the specificity of the language of the tradition. The argument runs that only those who have truly mastered this language can really comprehend and also accept that matters are as they are, and thus not to be changed. The often difficult but necessary recontextualizing move is thereby prematurely short-circuited. The particularity is absolutized and played off against the contextuality, more specifically against contextually new experiences of being Christian.

46. An encounter with someone of another religion or world view can at the same time result in a heightened consciousness of the limits of the communicability *ad extra* because of one's own narrative particularity, and press for an *ad intra* recontextualization of this particular narrativity (which in its turn will become again the basis for the communication *ad extra*).

3. *The recontextualization of theology through the category of interruption*

Analysing the current context in terms of detraditionalization and plurality (and the perception of this context) qualifies the way in which the theological discourse, as the reflexive discourse of the Christian faith, relates itself to – and enters into dialogue with – the discourses of others, all of whom are embedded in this context, both constituting and being constituted by it. I presently devote much attention towards developing the theological category of ‘interruption’ as a conceptual tool to reflect upon the relation between faith/theology and context. In what follows, I will shortly sketch this enterprise. What I would like to stress here is not only that the category of interruption structures the mediation between tradition and context in an adequate contextual manner, but also that it does so in a theologically legitimate manner.

Where anti-correlationist (anti-modern) theologies strongly relativize or deny the intrinsic involvement of Christian faith and theology with context and thus stress the discontinuity between tradition and context in particular, the category of interruption holds continuity and discontinuity together in a tensive relationship. Interruption is after all not identical with rupture, but implies that what is interrupted does not simply continue as though nothing had happened.⁴⁷

I will briefly present the two ways, both contextual and theological, in which this concept can assist us in our reflection on the relation between Christian faith and post-secular context.

(a) The category of interruption can demonstrate its first use as an exponent of what can be termed our contemporary *contextual* critical consciousness. The confrontation with religious otherness alerts the Christian narrative very specifically to the particularity of its own truth claim and interrupts any such pretence towards absoluteness. The post-modern contextual critical consciousness, gained from the confrontation with plurality and difference, here informs the Christian narrative of its borders and criticizes the tendency, inherent in every narrative – thus also in the Christian one – to shut itself into its own self-secured identity. The modern manoeuvre to link the Christian narrative, and thus its truth claim, in a qualified manner with a secular meta-discourse, has not only become unreliable but also proved counter-productive. Post-secular forms of Christian neo-traditionalism and fundamentalism also do not take into account the interruption of otherness caused by the confrontation with irreducible religious plurality. Due to the latter, however, the Christian narrative is thrown back upon its own narrativity and particularity. It becomes critically challenged to conceive of its truth claims on two

47. More technically speaking, interruption signifies an intrusion that does not destroy the narrative but problematizes the advance thereof. It disturbs the anticipated sequence of the one sentence risking itself upon the other, and disarms the security devices, which protect against disruption. Interruption refers to that ‘moment’, that ‘instance’, which cannot occur without the narrative, and yet cannot be captured by the narrative.

