

Matthias Lutz-Bachmann

After the Critique of Religion

I would like to introduce my thoughts on this topic with a few observations on the history of philosophy and its terminology. My aim in doing so is to elucidate the terms "religion" and "critique of religion" as I will be using them. I will begin by presenting my thoughts to you in two theses, which I will now elaborate on – to the extent that the purposes of this lecture dictate.

Thesis number one: The term "religion" as we customarily use it today was largely defined by modern philosophy. To be more precise it reflects – which the earlier term "religio" did not – modern philosophy's programme of epistemological critique; it also carries echoes and connotations of the political problems resulting from the denominational schism of Europe following the Reformation. And it reflects the de facto ongoing differentiation of Western societies into (more or less) mutually independent (systems or) spheres of validity.

Thesis number two: The philosophy of religion, which only modern philosophers designated as a sub-discipline of philosophy in its own right, was from the outset construed in terms of epistemological critique, and a critique of religion subject to the primacy of reason.

This phase of the critique of religion thus construed in the name of philosophy's epistemological and rational claims comes to an end, however, the moment philosophy itself either for reasons of its own abandons, or for whatever other reasons is compelled to abandon, its claim to argue in the name of reason or on the basis of its access to truth.

In other words: The oft-invoked "end of philosophy", which some date following the death of Hegel, others following Nietzsche's assault on philosophy, and others following the

dissolution of philosophy into language critique or theory of science, also marks the end of any philosophical critique of religion which is to be taken seriously.

To elucidate the rationale of my first thesis I would like to draw attention to the etymology of the term "religion". The ancient Roman term "religio" was used primarily to denote the "performance of duties". In his "De natura deorum", Cicero for instance uses the terms "religio" and "pietas" to mean virtues or attitudes (*habitus*) which incline people to reliably perform that which the gods (or custom or cultic practice) require them to perform. This is the sense intended by Cicero in "De oratore", where he writes that "religio" is the attitude which inclines people towards care and cultic practice for a higher order of nature, which they call a divine order:

"Religio est quae superioris cuiusdam naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam cerimoniamque offert."

St. Augustine too adopts this definition, for instance in his late work "Retractationes" where, no doubt influenced by Lactantius, he derives the word "religio" from the verb "religere", which is to say from "careful observance of a binding rule". Although Augustine speaks of Christian belief as a whole in terms of a "vera religio", he ascribes to this "religio" – still remaining entirely consistent with Cicero – the quality of representing the just and true way of maintaining a link ("religatio") with God and a bond between people. In keeping with this etymological tradition, the word "religio" in medieval Latin also stood for what we call an ecclesiastical "order", and "status religionis" was used to mean "state of religious order". In the 13th century St. Thomas Aquinas used the word "religio" to denote one amongst other natural virtues through whose binding force and through the exercise of which a person does that which s/he owes to God. Thus Aquinas draws a clear distinction between "religio" and the supernatural virtues of "faith", "hope" and "charity". Christian talk of God (theology) as a whole is referred to as "sacra doctrina", and as "theologia", but never as "religio".

Departing from the classical and medieval etymological tradition of "religio", we use the term "religion" to denote not a specific natural virtue or attitude, but nothing less than a dimension of meaningfulness or, expressed in more general sociological (or philosophical) terms, a sphere (or genre) of validity (or discourse) – as distinct from other spheres of validity (or discourse) such as those of law, politics, the sciences and the arts.

Such understandings of religion as a particular "language game" as described in Wittgenstein's "Logical Investigations", or to borrow Ernst Cassirer's words as a highly specific "symbolic form" with its own sense of validity applying only to itself, has been articulated only in the wake of the intra-societal processes of differentiation that began in Europe in the late Middle Ages and early modernity. It was during the British Enlightenment that the term "a religion" (with the indefinite article) was used for the first time in today's customary sense to denote one general sphere of action or validity, or one system of cultural and social meaning, alongside and in relation to other spheres of action or validity, which in terms of their allocated functionalities and modes of proposition, truth claims and underlying rationales, in other words in terms of their inherent logic, are specific and as such distinct from those of "religion" (without the indefinite article). As the modern history of the term demonstrates, the conflict-laden plurality of denominations and creeds in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe helped shape this new reference of the term "religion". This phenomenon is also illustrated by the emergence of the concept of a "natural religion" as opposed to the plurality of "religions of historical revelation". Philosophy responded by construing this new concept of religion as a sphere of validity for a highly specific form of interpretation of world and self, distinct from other forms of expression, as being an elementary question of the age. It is the question which had equally explosive implications both for the political constitution of the then emergent territorial states, and for the various religious and church communities; the question as to whether and how, after the end of the denominational unity of Europe, the different validity claims of faith and reason, which is to say of insight based on revelation, and of knowledge gained by rational methods or by empirical experience of the world, could once again be reconciled. One step towards that

reconciliation at least was taken through the concept of a general religion based on the nature of the human being and his/her reason, conceived of as ahistorical.

The rationale for these thoughts on human beings, their rational nature and the religion appropriate to them was then also delivered by the philosophical discipline of the philosophy of reason. This differs from the older discipline of philosophical theology, practiced since Aristotle's "Metaphysics", in that philosophical theology investigates God, together with His attributes and predicates, whilst the philosophy of religion deals with humankind and their religion. The philosophy of religion should therefore be considered a new discovery made by modern philosophy.

At this point I would like to move on and elucidate my second thesis concerning the radical interrelationship between the philosophy of religion and the critique of religion.

The two major schools of modern philosophy, the philosophy of rationalism proceeding from Descartes and Leibniz, and the philosophy of empiricism proceeding from Francis Bacon, Locke and Hume, converged – despite their manifold differences – in their fundamental definition of the task of philosophy as being one of epistemological critique. They thus shared an understanding of philosophy as epistemological or rational critique, whose aim – as described by Descartes in his "Meditationes" – was to overcome the intellectual skepticism which had taken root, not least due to the experience of the differentiation processes within Europe's societies, and in the face of the plurality of religious creeds, and civil wars.

In this sense the two main streams of modern philosophy, rationalism and empiricism, both accord with the paradigm of a philosophy of mind. The philosophy of mind pursues a programme of seeking first of all to ground the ontological objectivity of the foundational, i.e. the primary conceptual schemata of human knowledge, by deploying a critique of human cognition or understanding.

In his prolog to the first edition of the "Critique of Pure Reason" published in 1786, Kant describes this epochal task of philosophy as "

" (CpureR XI). Kant goes on to claim that, by contrast, " " should be dealt with by reason itself, not by the authority of power, but in accordance with the " " of reason itself.

In his supplement, Kant makes clear that this description is nothing other than the epistemological program of the "critique of pure reason itself". In a footnote to this definition of the tasks of philosophy as epistemological and rational critique, Kant mentions the issue of religion. Here we read: "

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In these words of Kant we encounter the modern programme of the philosophy of religion as critique of religion. And here we see that the term "critique of religion" originally did not mean what the left Hegelians took it to mean and which has become today's prevailing usage, namely that the critique of religion implies the rejection of any or the refutation of a least one particular religion. Originally, it was rather taken to mean that philosophy – in accordance with its general fundamental task of epistemological and rational critique – should seek to identify a general notion of religion whose legitimacy can be demonstrated in the light of a universal and at the same time public critique based on transparent reason – or cannot be demonstrated, as the case may be.

In his "Philosophy of Religion" published in 1793, Kant then put forward his contribution to this task of philosophy as formulated in 1781, by defining the key feature of religion as being the operation which only it can perform of recognizing the God-given nature of the ethical imperatives already formulated by practical reason. Here, Kant is responding to a problem that was by no means peripheral in the Critique of Practical Reason. In the prologue to his work on religion Kant attaches great importance to the fact that his thoughts on religion presented therein, although manifestly oriented towards Biblical and especially New Testament motifs, remain strictly "within the bounds of mere reason", and do not raise the slightest claim to impose any prescriptions whatsoever on Biblical theology, and thus on the epistemological or scientific status of another university faculty. Conversely, however, he demands for philosophy an unrestricted freedom "of reason in matters religious"; "because", claims Kant "

" (Prolog 1793, BA XIX).

Kant's work on religion thus makes a contribution to demonstrating philosophically the reasonableness not only of religion per se, but also and especially of key motifs of New Testament tradition. In doing so he is at the same time able to overcome the unsatisfying philosophical alternative between a so-called "natural religion" on the one hand and a "revealed religion" on the other, the dichotomy formulated by the deistic philosophy of religion of the early Enlightenment.

Following Kant, this approach to philosophy of religion as rational critique of religion is pursued by thinkers as diverse as Friedrich Schleiermacher and G.W.Fr. Hegel. Schleiermacher attempts to legitimate religion by exploring wider epistemological issues

than Kant (he speaks of "a taste for the infinite"). Hegel does so by demonstrating the reasonableness of religion within the framework of his speculative idealism.

Admittedly, Hegel achieves this within his philosophical system at the cost of ascribing to the conceptually operating mind of the philosopher a superior power of insight into the absolute, as compared with the imagination-bound symbolic language of religion. Hegel's philosophy of religion to a certain extent marks not only the zenith of the philosophy of religion as philosophical critique of religion, but also demarcates its inherent limits.

After Hegel, however, the philosophy of religion and critique of religion increasingly go their separate ways.

I now come to my thesis number three, namely that we are now looking first of all at an "end of the critique of religion" in contemporary philosophy, and secondly at a turn or paradigm shift in the relationship between religion and philosophy.

I would also like to first outline this thesis in terms of the history of philosophy, before then proceeding to draw some systematic conclusions.

In the philosophy of the left Hegelians we see a programme of religious critique which critiques religion in harmony with that philosophy's more general programme, which is to pursue a philosophically motivated radical critique of philosophy. The critique of religion is one element of left Hegelian philosophy's critique of philosophy, especially with respect to Hegel.

In his "Preliminary theses on the reform of philosophy" of 1842, Feuerbach for instance declares the suppression of human sensuality and corporeality by Hegel and the whole of (chiefly idealistic) philosophy to date to be the actual "text of philosophy", whilst Marx – in contrast to both Hegel and Feuerbach – seeks to resolve all philosophy to date through a

programme of practical political action designed to overcome the self-alienation of man induced by conditions within society (see "German Ideology", Feuerbach thesis).

Although Feuerbach's and Marx' familiar critiques of religion still follow the axioms of a philosophy which claims insight into the truth, they no longer follow the project of a rational critique or critical reason (as put forward by Kant) – Feuerbach speaks of the "Essence of Christianity", Marx of the "nature" of capital. Both philosophers thus raise explicit epistemological and truth claims, and indeed understand their theses to be "scientific".

- but adopt Hegel's concept of a negation of the negative. Systematic doubt remains here as to whether this materialist recourse to Hegel's dialectic can succeed without lapsing into self-contradiction.

The no less notable critiques of religion put forward by Nietzsche and Freud finally abandon the programme of philosophy once and for all. Freud misconstrues himself as a positivist scientist, and any positive recourse to the epistemological programme of philosophy is far from his mind. In Nietzsche's thinking, and in his radical assault on Western philosophy's conception of knowledge and truth we see a rejection, a refutation of and indeed a contempt for religion. At least we certainly can no longer construe his work as a "critique of religion" to be judged by criteria of rational self-contradiction and evasive argument. Postmodern adherents of Nietzsche in particular take pains to demonstrate this post-philosophical nature of Nietzsche's thinking.

There is broad consensus on the fact that Nietzsche's thinking is to be seen in the context of other grand gestures of farewell which at the dawn of the twentieth century sought to first expose the traditional question of philosophy as "chimeric", and "meaningless", and then treat them therapeutically through language critique. By this point at the latest, however, consensus within philosophy as to what philosophy actually is, disintegrated once and for all, and the salient characteristic of philosophy, namely its quest for generally binding

criteria of reason and true knowledge, came to be highly problematic. At the core of today's crisis of philosophy, however, we increasingly encounter the question of whether and, if so, how a conception of public reason, a notion of enlightenment or of intersubjectively binding critique, can be grounded at all.

So what are the implications of this situation, as I have described it, for the issue of the critique of religion?

From what has been said so far, we can conclude with at least some degree of certainty that, without some concept of post-idealist reason, of a rationality that is not merely utilitarian or procedural, we can no longer expect any "critique of religion" in the sense understood by the traditional philosophy of religion. At best, we can expect a hermeneutics or phenomenology of religion. Consequently, the intellectual situation of our times is best described as the "end of the critique of religion", assuming we understand the latter as being the issue traditionally addressed by modern philosophy in the manner I have outlined.

Having said that, this does not mean that no form of critique of religion whatsoever would be conceivable today. It is self-evident that a critique of specific historic or institutionally mediated forms of religion is possible at any time. But a critique of religion which seeks to examine the reasonableness of the legitimacy or choices of religion seems to be out of the question. And were such critiques to emerge, then they would certainly no longer be able to do so with a gesture of authority founded on a philosophical conception of reason or claim on truth which all concerned would be compelled in principle to acknowledge. The consequence of this is that the individual authority of certainty in my "belief" seems to have the last word, also concerning the interpretation of what we can call religious experience. This is the precisely the point at which Ratzinger's analysis, with which I began, and our philosophical reflection intersect.

In relation to this general outline of the problem I would now like to make the following concluding remarks:

In their "Dialectic of Enlightenment" published in 1947, Horkheimer and Adorno had already attempted to do justice to the fundamental crisis of philosophy in the twentieth century. In this book, the proponents of the original Frankfurt Critical Theory were motivated by an interest in recovering for contemporary philosophy a rehabilitated notion of public reason liberated from the entanglements of instrumentalization. As well all know, this was intended as a contribution towards resolving the social and political crisis of the mid-twentieth century. Yet as they were of the opinion that such a notion of reason could not be obtained from the conceptual apparatus of "science", they probed the cultural forms of modern/abstract art (painting/music) and (in this case Jewish) religion to see what insights could be gained for the reconstruction of a philosophical conception of reason and critique. This was something of a "Copernican revolution" in the relationship between rational critique and religion.

But how was this "turn" in the relationship between rational critique and religion constituted? I would say, generally speaking, that it proceeds from contemporary philosophy's turn (and this applies not only to Frankfurt Critical Theory following Horkheimer and Adorno, but also to Wittgenstein, Levinas or Habermas) towards the semantic potential of the "language of the religious". And this orientation of philosophy towards religion occurs (at least in the case of Horkheimer and Adorno) with the declared intention of exposing insights contained within the tradition of religious language without which a rehabilitated, whole and undivided conception of philosophical reason and critique evidently cannot be obtained, or at least not without much further ado. This quest for potentials for a rehabilitated notion of reason in the symbols and propositions of religion implicitly acknowledges that religion is capable of grounding truth such as to be generally relevant, i.e. is capable of generating insights concerning human beings and the world, which can be compared with other propositions, including scientific propositions, and defended or attacked discursively, i.e. by force of

argument. But in this situation the truth content of religion can no longer be measured simply by philosophy's benchmark of reason and its programme of rationalist or empiricist epistemology, as it could in the age of traditional philosophy of religion. At this point the objection might be raised: If we legitimately accord religion truth claims, how can we continue to maintain the old liberal call for tolerance between the religions? Does civil religion's postulate of tolerance between the religions not compel us to abandon such truth claims? My answer to that would be: quite the contrary.

Recognition in principle of religion's truth-capability includes its discursive treatment and critique through argument. These latter aspects, however, call for tolerance towards all proponents of religions, as well as equal opportunity for articulation. To disregard the truth-capability of religions in the name of tolerance would lead not to their recognition, but to their elimination.

In this new constellation religions, sciences and philosophies no longer enter the arena with each claiming to be able to specify or represent respectively the sole standard by which the truth content of the propositions from the other spheres must be measured.

The logical consequence of this self-critical insight within the specific and therefore limited epistemological and validity claims maintained by the respective religions, sciences and philosophies, is a new relationship between these spheres. This relationship must be characterized by an awareness on the part of each that they are inevitably dependent on the others. The salient aspect of this rational interdependency is the insight that the knowledge contained in the propositions of religions, sciences and philosophies not only can be mutually complementary, but in a certain respect even must be so; it must also be acknowledged that the knowledge contained in any one "sub-system" cannot be translated or transposed absolutely such that it could be assimilated in toto by any other "sub-system".

