

## **Otherness and Ambiguity: The Gaze of the Other in Times of Globalized Religion and Growing Exclusivism**

DIRK MARTIN ANSORGE\*

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### **Abstract:**

The following article considers the impact of non-Christian religions and secular worldviews on self-understanding and identity-building of Christianity. After presenting the classical theological models of the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions, a concept of “tolerance of ambiguity” is introduced. The concept is regarded as a means of substantiating the approach to religious plurality on a level of mutual interrelationship and daily practice between adherents of different religions. It acknowledges the “gaze of the other” as a valuable opportunity for learning from other religions and worldviews, thereby deepening one’s own religious convictions and practices.

### **Keywords:**

Claim to truth, Exclusivism, Identity, Interreligious dialogue, Otherness, Religious pluralism, Tolerance of ambiguity.

### **La alteridad y la ambigüedad: La mirada del otro en tiempos de religión globalizada y creciente exclusivismo**

#### **Sumario:**

En el presente artículo, se aborda la influencia de las religiones no cristianas y las concepciones seculares en la autocomprensión y la configuración de la identidad del cristianismo. Tras una introducción a los modelos teológicos clásicos de la relación del cristianismo con las religiones no cristianas, se presenta el concepto de «tolerancia de la ambigüedad». Este concepto se presenta como un medio para fundamentar el enfoque de la pluralidad religiosa en un nivel de interrelación mutua y práctica diaria entre los seguidores de diferentes religiones. Este enfoque destaca la importancia de la «mirada del otro» como una valiosa oportunidad para aprender de otras religiones y cosmovisiones, lo que conduce a un enriquecimiento y una profundización en las propias convicciones y prácticas religiosas.

#### **Palabras clave:**

Alteridad, Diálogo interreligioso, Exclusivismo, Identidad, Pluralismo religioso, Pretensión de verdad, Tolerancia de la ambigüedad.

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\* Professor of Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology, Frankfurt am Main. [ansorge@sankt-georgen.de](mailto:ansorge@sankt-georgen.de) <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2160-1388>

## 1. Otherness and Models of Religious Plurality

In the latter half of the 20th century, it became increasingly apparent to the Christian churches that in a globalised world non-Christian religions were important as dialogue partners, from whom they could learn and thus deepen their own faith. Non-Christian religions no longer were considered as rivals in the pursuit of human salvation. Instead, there was an acknowledgement of the potential for learning and enrichment of faith that these religions could offer.

### 1.1 *Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism*

Furthermore, it swiftly became obvious that the mere existence of non-Christian religions also poses a theological challenge. In addressing this challenge, three models have been proposed to define the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions: religious exclusivism, religious inclusivism, and religious pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, the prevailing model in Christian churches up until the 20th century was that of exclusivist theology. However, contemporary theologians are increasingly advocating a shift towards religious theological inclusivism. This model is characterised by its recognition of the significance of other religions for one's own religious beliefs and behaviour. Nevertheless, the adherents of the inclusivist model remain steadfast in their conviction that this significance is fully realised within the context of one's own religion. The superiority of one's own religion is thus emphasised, as it is regarded as unsurpassable.

In contrast, the doctrine of religious pluralism posits that the ultimate divine reality is manifest in diverse religious traditions. These forms are regarded as being mutually equivalent. Religious pluralism refrains from establishing a hierarchical structure amongst different religious traditions. Its proponents assert that this doctrine fosters peaceful coexistence amongst adherents of different religious traditions. However, religious pluralism is frequently accused of relativising truth claims made by different religions.

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<sup>2</sup> The three models to define the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions were originally presented by Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982). See also Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology Clarified and Reaffirmed", in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration*. Ed. by Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 13-27; Domenic Marbaniang, *Theology of Religion: Pluralism, Inclusivism, and Exclusivism* (Bangalore: ACTS Academy Papers, 2007).

Other models proposed to define the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions include religious interiorism.<sup>3</sup> The concept of Christian interiorism has emerged as a critical approach to any form of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. It is characterised by a commitment to understanding and respect for other faiths while recognising diverse truths as valid and meaningful. Interiorism emphasises that each religion possesses a unique and indisputable truth within its own tradition.

Interiorism and inclusivism differ primarily in their respective claims regarding the Christian message and its relationship to other religions. Interiorism does not claim to be a religion of superiority over other faiths. Rather, it recognises its role as a service to the uniqueness and unsurpassability of each religion. A notable example of this approach can be seen in the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, where both religions are recognised as valid and significant expressions of religious truth, even though they may have different perspectives on certain doctrines or practices.

Another alternative to the three models to conceive the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions was proposed in 2002 by Paul F. Knitter in his book *Introducing Theologies of Religions*. Knitter outlined four possible models that one could adopt: the replacement model, the fulfilment model, the mutuality model, and the acceptance model.<sup>4</sup> Knitter's "replacement model" corresponds to exclusivism but it differentiates between complete replacement and partial replacement. The latter suggests that non-Christian religions might have access to God's revelation, but not to God's salvation. The "fulfilment model" is close to inclusivism, while the "mutuality model" resembles partly to the pluralists' view on non-Christian religions. The difference to "pure" pluralism consists in that it does not reject objective truth but posits that religions acknowledge different aspects of it so that adherents of different religions can learn from one another. Knitter's "acceptance model", in turn, corresponds to "pure" pluralism.

In recent years, there has been a marked decline in the intensity of theological debates surrounding the various models. It is therefore the intention of this paper to take the aforementioned theological models as a conceptual background against which the question of the acceptance of otherness and ambiguity in religions, in particular Christianity, will be examined. The objective is to achieve a more precise definition of the meaning of otherness in respect to religious identity and self-understanding.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gerhard Gäde, „Interiorismus. Ein Vorschlag für einen Ausweg aus der religionstheologischen Sackgasse“, *Theologie der Gegenwart* 46 (2003): 14-27; Peter Knauer, „Christus in den Religionen: Interiorism“, *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 51 (2004): 237-252.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll [NY]: Orbis Books, 2002).

## 1.2. Inclusionist Recognition of Religious Otherness

The contemporary era of globalisation is characterised by the movement of populations and the dissemination of information on a global scale. The intersection of divergent religious interpretations of reality and religious practices is an indisputable phenomenon which can be observed across the world.

During the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has confronted this challenge through several documents. In its declaration *Nostra Aetate*, the Council states with regard to non-Christian religions that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions” (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 2; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16-17; *Ad Gentes*, no. 11). The Council adopts a position that deviates, at least in part, from the theological tradition by affirming that salvation is attainable outside of the Church.<sup>5</sup> However, the issue of whether non-Christian religions *as such* can contribute to the process of salvation remained unresolved.<sup>6</sup> The question thus posed is not directed towards a theology of religions, but rather a theology of religious pluralism: What significance does the diversity of religions have in God’s plan of salvation for humanity?

A historical perspective reveals that the discourse surrounding the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was predominantly characterised by an apologetic approach. This applies to the Lutheran theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) as well as the Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). Catholic theology was similarly dominated by the doctrine of the uniqueness and universal salvific significance of the Christian Church until well into the 20th century.<sup>7</sup>

However, there were exceptions to this general rule. Even prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904-1984) propounded

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<sup>5</sup> With regard to those righteous people who were already destined by God for eternal bliss before Christ, representative theologians like Augustine, Bonaventure, Martin Luther and Yves Congar speak of the “*Ecclesia ab Abel*”. Cf. Florian Klug, *Beyond the Visible Church: The Motif of the ecclesia ab Abel from Augustine to James Alison* (Collegeville [MN]: Liturgical Press Academic, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> In its declaration *Christus Dominus. On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, published in the Holy Year 2000 (August 6), the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith invited to reflect “on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God’s salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation” (no. 14). Apparently, this is also about “forms” and “elements”, not about religions *as such* (cf. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html), accessed on March 12, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Loe-Joo Tan, “The Catholic Theology of Religions: A Survey of Pre-Vatican II and Conciliar Attitudes Towards Other Religions”. In *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67, n. 3 (2014): 285-303.

the doctrine that all individuals who yearn for salvation are to be considered “Christians” in a certain sense. Non-Christian religions do not direct their adherents away from Christ; rather, they guide them towards Him, albeit in a manner that is not necessarily apparent to them.<sup>8</sup> The rationale behind this assertion is that even non-Christians are referred to the all-encompassing horizon of created being. According to Christian doctrine, this horizon has revealed itself in the individual Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>9</sup>

Rahner’s approach is commonly referred to as religious “inclusivism”. While recognising other religious inclusivists’ beliefs in principle, adherents of this approach consider their own religion to be superior in certain respects. Religious inclusivism is a counterpoint to the “exclusivism” that has been advocated for centuries by various Christian churches and denominations. According to this perspective, salvation is considered to be exclusively attainable within the confines of Christianity, specifically through the sacrament of baptism.

This perspective, which emerged in the Late Antiquity and enjoyed broad acceptance during the Middle Ages, was subjected to fundamental critique in the early modern period. The validity of Christian exclusivism was called into question due to the considerable number of unbaptised individuals encountered by Western Christians in Asia and the “New World” as they progressed in their colonial and missionary endeavours. The salvation of these individuals could not be ascertained without the assumption that God’s universal will to save was effective somehow even without baptism.

It was not until the 19th century, however, that the theological view that individuals could also be saved outside the church if they lived a morally pure life prevailed. This shift was supported by the doctrine of an “Ecclesia ab Abel”, which had already been advocated in the early church. According to this doctrine, the righteous of the Old Covenant wait in a kind of *limbo* for the Crucified One, who will lead them to paradise after fulfilling his redemptive work.

The “pluralistic theology of religion” formulated an answer to the question of the status of non-Christian religions as such that went beyond both religious theological exclusivism and inclusivism.<sup>10</sup> One of its pioneers was the British

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the non-Christian Religions” [1961], in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 115-134.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner, “Anonymous Christians”, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1969), 390-398; Karl Rahner, “Observations on the Problem of the ‘Anonymous Christian’”, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14 (New York: Seabury, 1976), 280-294.

<sup>10</sup> For an initial orientation, see: Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions. Biblical, Historical & Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove [IL]: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

Presbyterian theologian John Hick (1922-2012). According to Hick, all major religions agree that in one way or another they facilitate the experience of an ultimate reality that is beyond all human comprehension. It is therefore permitted for the adherents of the various religions to approach this ultimate reality in different ways – be it as a personal, threefold God as in Christianity, be it as “Tao” or as impersonal “nothingness” in Buddhism.

A seminal publication by Hick in 1980 bears the evocative title *God has Many Names*. Subsequently, in 1995, he articulated a concept of *A Rainbow of Faiths*. The only commonality shared by the ultimate reality as it is viewed by the adherents of different religions is that reference to it engenders the release of believers from their individual or collective self-referentiality. Religious people are open to the ultimate reality, but for that very reason they are also open to their fellow human beings and their environment. According to Hick, this attitude leads to an ethic of respect for people and care for creation. Awareness of one’s own limitations also fosters respect for those of other faiths.

Hick underlines that his concept in no way calls into question the binding nature of religious beliefs. If this were the case, then existential commitment to one’s religion to the point of martyrdom would be unimaginable. However, religious people will always recognise that there are people alongside them who hold different religious beliefs and who live those beliefs as resolutely as they do. This can lead to a fertile dialogue between people who hold different religious beliefs but recognise each other as equals despite their differences in ritual practice and ethical conduct.

### *1.3. Debates on Otherness and Religious Truth-Claims*

Theological pluralists, such as Hick, have been accused of relativising religious truth-claims. In response to this criticism, some theologians have sought to mediate between theological pluralism and theological inclusivism. One of them was the Belgian Jesuit Jacques Dupuis (1923-2004). Dupuis understood the diversity of religions as the expression of a richness willed by God. This phenomenon can be attributed to the singular divine work of salvation in history: the incarnation of the Logos and the advent of the Holy Spirit, which resulted in the genesis of diverse religious traditions. As an unfolding of God’s Trinitarian action, the diversity of religions should not be seen as a deficit.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll [NY]: Orbis Books, 1997).

Nevertheless, the question arises as to how the uniqueness and universality of Christ's salvific mediation can be preserved and theologically justified. In 2000, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a *Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, which was entitled "Dominus Iesus". According to this declaration, the mediation of salvation is inseparably linked to the incarnation of the divine Word.<sup>12</sup>

In a *Notification* to Dupuis' book published in 2001, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith formally rejected the idea that God's self-revelation in the incarnation of the Son needed to be supplemented.<sup>13</sup> Dupuis made this objection his own by signing the Roman document. He agreed with the Congregation's assumption that non-Christian religions should not be regarded as complementary paths to salvation in relation to the Church of Jesus Christ but as unfolding the truth of Christian belief within different cultural conditions and religious traditions.

Proponents of the pluralistic model are accused by conservative Catholic theologians, as well as Protestant theologians mostly belonging to the evangelical spectrum, of renouncing the universal claim to truth of the Christian faith. These theologians recall the Christian doctrine that Christ is the Saviour not only of Christians but of all human beings. Access to salvation, they argue, is inconceivable without explicit reference to Jesus Christ.

Advocates of religious pluralism seek to counter such concerns by pointing out that it is by no means irrelevant which religion a person feels he or she belongs to. On the contrary, it is not inconsistent with religious pluralism that a person may find salvation through one religion but not through another. As a rule, an individual's commitment to a particular religion is determined by their personal biography. The spiritual orientations of individuals are largely influenced by the religious traditions into which they have been raised, and as such, these traditions play a significant role in guiding their understanding of truth. Pluralists are guided by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which, while maintaining Christianity's commitment to advocating for the universal truth, does not assert an obligation for all individuals to adopt the Christian faith to achieve salvation.

In this context, it is imperative to underscore that the notion of salvation does not constitute the primary focal point across all religions. A case in point is Judaism, wherein the adherence to the commandments of the Torah (*Halacha*)

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<sup>12</sup> Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, esp. no. 4 and 11.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism** (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York 1997) by Father Jacques Dupuis, S.J. (January 24, 2001), accessed on March 12, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20010124\\_dupuis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20010124_dupuis_en.html).

takes precedence over the pursuit of salvation. Consequently, the prospect of a messianic denouement to history is considered to be of lesser significance than one's quotidian actions. Muslims, in turn, do not know the Christian doctrine of original sin that must be overcome by God's salvific action. Other religious systems are based on ritual observances; some are devoid of codified laws that govern daily conduct and behaviour.

Despite such variety and plurality, adherents of all religions must deal with religious otherness. They practice their own religion under the auspices of members of other religious communities. Accordingly, they will determine their self-understanding and identity.

## **2. Religions confronted with Social Otherness**

But it is also modern society that scrutinizes religions carefully. In contemporary society, theological discourses concerning various religions are often characterised by a political conceptual framework that exhibits a degree of suspicion towards religious doctrines and practices. While it is acknowledged that religions do not inherently negate their contribution to the well-being of society, it is also observed that their role in exacerbating existing conflicts and hindering their resolution is frequently given prominence.

### *2.1 Deepening Otherness and Exclusion*

And indeed: In the 21st century, humanity seems to have slipped into an apocalyptic scenario, sometimes fuelled by religion. The destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City has come to symbolise the global escalation in terrorist and military violence, which has reached unprecedented levels. This has culminated in the devastating armed conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa (summary incomplete).

But that's not enough: The smoking tree stumps in the Amazon region are a metaphor for the threat of ecological catastrophe on a global scale. Instead of focusing on joint action in the face of the impending end of humanity, nationalism, populism and chauvinism dominate domestic political programmes and foreign policy strategies. Keywords such as "climate crisis" or "refugee crisis" bring to mind a sinking ship - a ship, of course, on which not all fellow travellers are endeavouring to seal the gaping leaks together, but on which everyone is only trying to save themselves.

However, where political and economic power is in the hands of national egoists and international corporations, voices that remind us that the major

challenges of a globalised world can only be solved together are hardly recognised. Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si", published in 2015 and at that time widely welcomed but now almost forgotten, did not have a lasting effect. In this encyclical, Francis emphasises that our planet can only be saved if not only all people of good will but also members of religions work together.<sup>14</sup> This appeal was recalled 2023 in "Laudate Deum".<sup>15</sup> Who would disagree with the Pope? Nonetheless, contemporary political and economic developments appear to be oriented in a divergent direction.

The principles that govern the preservation of nature are analogous to those that facilitate peace on a global scale. Admittedly, peaceful relations between members of different religious communities alone do not guarantee world peace. However, the absence of peaceful relations between religious communities engenders the potential for violent conflicts to persist. The question, then, is how religions can contribute to peaceful coexistence when they have, and continue to, fuel violent conflicts.

The debate pertains to the way religions and their adherents encounter the pervasive phenomenon of otherness in a globalised world. Do the well-established patterns of marginalisation and exclusion also pertain to this globalised context? Alternatively, do religions provide effective alternatives to the process of self-justification and othering?

## 2.2. Religious Dialogue and Peace-Making

In a globally networked world, it appears that dialogue between religions, cultures, and societies is the only viable option for mutual understanding and peaceful cohabitation on Earth. The objective of this discourse is to address the substantial ecological, social and political challenges confronting humanity as it commences the third millennium. The overarching objective should be the eradication of terror and violence, which are frequently justified not only by political and economic interests, but also by religiously legitimised claims. Furthermore, it is imperative that all parties concerned endeavour to establish economic justice and the responsible use of natural resources.

Notwithstanding the persistent diversity in political ideologies worldwide, there is an incumbent diversity of religious traditions. Consequently, the quest

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si' on Care for our Common Home* (May 24, 2015), accessed on March 12, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html), e. g. no. 201.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation "*Laudate Deum*" to all People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis (October 4, 2023), accessed on March 12, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html).

for a unifying belief or practice that would encompass all religious communities appears, at best, illusory. Even the concept of “religion” is controversially disputed among experts.<sup>16</sup> The issue is how to address the presence of multiple religious identities and their respective beliefs and practices. In the context of inter-religious dialogue, it is imperative to examine the relationship between that which is inherently divergent and that which is, by some means, unifying despite the manifest differences that exist.

To address this challenge, it is beneficial to make a distinction between an exclusive and an inclusive conception of otherness. What seems to be called for is an attention for otherness that is willing to learn and that values the other as a possible impetus for a deeper understanding of one’s own. The issue under discussion is not concerned with the relativisation of religious identity; rather, it is concerned with the acknowledgement that a multitude of phenomena in the world can be interpreted in a variety of ways without resulting in a failure to recognise them. Adopting an inclusive perspective on otherness engenders an appreciation for alternative interpretations of the world. This approach has the potential to enhance one’s own comprehension of reality and to facilitate peaceful coexistence among diverse viewpoints, perspectives and actions.

Adopting an inclusive conception of otherness, religions have the capacity to provide an important service for the peaceful coexistence of all people. The following considerations substantiate and develop this thesis, particularly with regard to the monotheistic religions.

### 2.3. *Otherness in Philosophical and Religious Perspective*

Many philosophers in modernity understand “otherness” to be the dimension of identity that recognises the “other” not as a threat, but as a constitutive dimension of one’s own. According to the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), human beings become aware of their own freedom only in relation to other free individuals. Consequently, mutual recognition of rational individuals is a prerequisite for the individual’s identity.<sup>17</sup> From a personalist standpoint, as articulated by Martin Buber (1878-1965), the concept may be

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<sup>16</sup> On the debates surrounding the concept of religion cf. Robert A. Segal, “Theories of Religion”, in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*. Ed. by John R. Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2005), 49-60; Danel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2006); Michael Stausberg, *Contemporary Theories of religion* (London: Routledge, 2009); Gabriel Levy, *Beyond Heaven and Earth: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Cambridge [Mass.]: MIT Press, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right, according to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*. Ed. by Frederick Neuhouser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 42. The argument for intersubjectivity is central to the conception of selfhood developed in the “Foundations of the Science of Knowledge” (*Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, 1794/1795).

succinctly outlined as follows: “Man becomes an I through a You”.<sup>18</sup> The French phenomenologist Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) emphasised that otherness is constitutive for the development of selfhood and identity. The “other” is therefore not something external or alien to the self, but an essential dimension of selfhood. According to Ricœur, human identities are the provisional result of a tense dialogue with the other.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) constantly stressed the fact that this reference back to oneself is beyond the control of the self, rather taking it “hostage” and thus making it a “subject”.

Levinas, but also numerous thinkers of so-called “postmodernism”, have determinedly advocated of the rehabilitation of the notion of “otherness”. According to them the term “otherness” refers to the relationship between a plurality of interrelated and mutually dependent subjects. It can thus be posited that “otherness” is a constitutive element of the gender relationship, and moreover, of every social role that an individual assumes within a community or society. Indeed, some theorists as Michel Foucault (1926-1984) posit that the individual is the mere result of structural predispositions.<sup>20</sup>

Religiously committed people are confronted with otherness when they interact with individuals who are committed to different religious beliefs and worldviews. Thus, the perception of otherness, as influenced by religion, is characterised by the interplay between commonalities and differences, which are intricately interwoven, creating a multifaceted and nuanced understanding of cultural and religious identities.

Even though religious people generally share the conviction that the mere fact of the world does not exhaustively reveal its reality, their views often differ widely as to the nature of its “meta-physical” origin and purpose. Furthermore, adherents of disparate religious traditions frequently diverge in their ethical conclusions, stemming from the varying interpretations of reality inherent in their respective doctrines. This is because divergent perceptions of the world give rise to divergent sets of values, which in turn orientate options for action.

Religious people also encounter otherness from another side, namely from a world that has become fundamentally “disenchanted” and deeply secularised by technology. This kind of “secularity” is not an original, specific description

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970), 80.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* [Soi-même comme un autre; 1990]. Trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> For Foucault’s concept of the human self, see Herbert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1983); Diana Taylor, ed., *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing, 2011).

of modernity; it is, rather, the product of a technologised civilisation.<sup>21</sup> Its gods are not numinous powers, but mathematical formulae and physical laws. The modernity in which religious people reside does not entail an absolute opposition to the technical world; rather, it becomes one of a number of possible ways to live. Consequently, the self-image and actions of religious people are deeply influenced by technology. A smartphone, for example, functions independently of the religious beliefs of those who manufacture or use it.

Religious beliefs frequently emerge as a salient factor when discussing matters pertaining to life itself. Such instances include discussions regarding birth control, specific medical interventions, personal hygiene, attire and the consumption of foodstuffs. Religious convictions deeply influence the ritual behaviour of religiously committed people. Such ways of conduct and rituals, in turn, are essential sources of religious identity.

In politics, on the other hand, or in business, religious attitudes appear to be of little relevance at first glance. Nevertheless, they determine underlying values and options for action, even in areas that ostensibly follow autonomous or “secular” regulations.

In relation to political conflicts, a fundamental “ambivalence of the sacred” is often diagnosed.<sup>22</sup> Adherents of religious views can exacerbate political conflicts, but they can also contribute to overcoming them. And although religious authorities generally emphasise the peace potential of the religious traditions they represent, political conflicts in the past and present have often been fuelled by references to allegedly compelling religious duties.

Could one possible explanation for the ambivalence of the sacred be the various understandings of otherness? Where otherness is not perceived exclusively, but in an inclusive sense as a constitutive dimension of one’s own religious understanding, otherness must not necessarily be interpreted as a threat. On the other hand, where otherness is rejected as menace for one’s own identity, isolation and hostility are virtually inevitable. The peacefulness claimed by all religions then inevitably falls victim to aggressive exclusivism.

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<sup>21</sup> On terminology, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 13-16.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Robert Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

### 3. Otherness and “Tolerance of Ambiguity”

Against this scenery of ambivalence, a few years ago the German Islamic scholar Thomas Bauer introduced a proposal into the public debate concerning social and political mechanisms of exclusion. Bauer is concerned with the concept of “tolerance of ambiguity”.<sup>23</sup> This term, which originally comes from psychology, describes people’s ability to tolerate ambiguous situations and contradictory behaviour. “Tolerance of ambiguity” refers to the ability of a person or a society to tolerate conflicting values and truths without insisting on the validity of their own convictions. People who are tolerant of ambiguity are willing to accept otherness in worldviews and behaviour. They are ready to perceive culturally determined differences without judging them negatively or even reacting aggressively.<sup>24</sup>

#### 3.1. Thomas Bauer’s Concept of “Tolerance of Ambiguity”

Unlike “indeterminacy”, “vagueness” or “ambivalence”, the term “ambiguity” refers to the oscillation between several possible meanings, each of which is, however, quite determined and clear in itself. In this respect, the concept of “ambiguity” is predicated on the premise of autonomy in decision-making, whilst concomitantly necessitating a certain degree of substantiation for such decisions. Faced with a number of possible interpretations of a phenomenon, observers cannot escape the task of deciding in favour of a particular interpretation. The subjects are obliged to provide a rationale for their decision, and they are generally able to do so. Nevertheless, they will always take decisions aware of the fact that other decisions are also possible and plausible. This results in an attitude that accepts a plurality of interpretations and actions.

The Islamologist Bauer posits that classical Islam possessed the inherent capacity to accommodate contradictory positions, both internally and externally, without necessitating their integration into a unifying conceptual synthesis. This phenomenon exerted a distinctive influence on the development of Islamic customs and ethos in the formative era of Islam. According to Bauer, it was only during the colonial era that the demand for rigid moral standards, imported from Christianity, was introduced into Islamic cultures.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*. Transl. by Heinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Ullrich, „Grundrisse einer philosophischen Begriffsgeschichte von Ambiguität“, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 32 (1989): 121-169; Jack Reis, *Ambiguitätstoleranz. Beiträge zur Entwicklung eines Persönlichkeitskonstrukts* (Heidelberg: Asanger, 1997).

In the contemporary era, this moral and political rigidity manifests itself in the form of violent Islamist fundamentalism. The self-absolutisation that characterises Islamic fundamentalism aims to exclude all other religious interpretations of the world, moral concepts and moral practices. In this respect, Islamic fundamentalism is analogous to other fundamentalist attitudes that are recognised in Judaism, Christianity and other religions.

Introducing the term “tolerance of ambiguity” into the study of culture and religion, Thomas Bauer initially wanted to draw attention to the fact that the equation of “Islam” and “fundamentalism” often made in the West today lacks any historical basis. For the Islamic cultural area, Bauer notes the prevalence of attitudes over the centuries, which tolerate ambiguity in thinking and acting. Such tolerance has allowed Muslims to accept otherness and ambiguity. Aggressive exclusivism, on the other hand, to which religious fundamentalism tends, was completely alien to the cultural sphere of Islam for centuries, Bauer argues.

The sources analysed by Bauer are predominantly from the historical periods when Islam was under the rule of the Umayyads (661-750) and the Abbasids (750-1258). The respective texts provide an overall picture of Islam that little has in common with aggressive exclusivism or religious fundamentalism. Of course, there are exceptions, such as the religiously intolerant rule of the Almoravids and Almohads in Morocco and Al-Andalus (11th to 13th centuries) and the Wahhabi regime on the Arabian Peninsula from the 18th century onwards. Nonetheless, in the era of Islamic expansion and prosperity, known as the “glory days of Islam”, Muslims were not inherently intolerant and did not necessarily display tendencies towards violent fundamentalism.

Until the 19th century, the creation of a culturally and religiously homogeneous society was not a political, religious or social ideal in large parts of the Islamic world, Bauer argues. For centuries, Christians, Jews and Muslims had largely lived together peacefully in a legally stable area. It was only in the course of European colonialism that longing for overcoming ambiguity has been prevailing. Ever since, the sexual prudery associated with the Victorian era has dominated the Islamic culture.

Bauer has since expanded his thesis with a view to the social, cultural and political developments outlined above.<sup>25</sup> In a more extensive essay, entitled “The Disambiguation of the World,” Bauer illustrates the contemporary tendency in society to reduce diversity in politics, art, music, literature, religion,

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Thomas Bauer, *Die Vereindeutigung der Welt. Über den Verlust an Mehrdeutigkeit und Vielfalt* (Ditzingen: Reclam, 2018). Critically, see Gunnar Hindrichs, “Eindeutigkeit”, *Merkur* 75, no. 866 (2021): 49-59. Hindrichs perceives in Bauer’s plea for tolerance of ambiguity an insufficiently differentiated critique of modernity - to the point of “animosities against modernity” (51).

and business by forcing back that which is unexpected and nonconformist. Bauer issues a warning about the potential consequences of a loss of diversity, which he terms “fundamentalist disambiguation” or “meaning-negating indifference”. Bauer contends that both of these attitudes pose a threat to the integrity of liberal democratic societies. He proposes a strategy of tolerance for ambiguity, which he believes is conducive to peaceful coexistence among individuals with diverse cultural identities and religious beliefs.

Bauer correctly posits that many current developments in societies not only in the West, but worldwide, aim to bring about disambiguity in all areas of human life. Ethno-religious “cleansing”, as well as various forms of traditionalism and militant nationalism, are an expression of a globally widespread striving for disambiguity. A widely accepted explanation for such development is that the individual and collective coping with modernity is characterised by the attempt to counter the perception of loss of identity, growing confusion and social insecurity introduced by globalisation.

Against this backdrop, an increasing “intolerance to ambiguity” appears to be both understandable and dangerous: It is understandable as a compensation for increasing insecurity caused by economic, social and ecological crises; as intolerance, however, it behaves violently and ruthlessly towards the “other”, whether this other is the political opponent, the refugee or the religiously different believer. And this is obviously not only true in the Islamic world.

### *3.2. Countering Ambiguity in the Catholic Church*

Bauer’s thesis has proven to be a subject of considerable debate. Indeed, it has the capacity to provoke introspection and self-critique with regard to the tenets also of Christianity. The question that needs to be addressed is whether there is an inherent predisposition in all religions towards intolerance.

Bauer posits that tolerance of ambiguity is less pronounced in Christianity than in pre-modern Islam. The reason is that Latin Europe in the Middle Ages was a largely homogeneous religious area in which Jews were just tolerated and from which Muslims were excluded. By contrast, in the Christian mission territories all over the globe, Bauer perceives religious practices that remained deliberately ambiguous due to the acculturation required there.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, there has also been a noticeable endeavour to avoid ambiguity in the Catholic Church since the 19th century. This goes hand in hand with a powerful tendency to unify practice and doctrine. The German dogmatist Michael Seewald has explained this endeavour with the intention of

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Bauer, *Vereindeutigung...*, 20-24.

the Church's magisterium to bring clarity about disputed theological subjects and create binding moral norms in the face of an increasingly religiously and ideologically pluralistic society.<sup>27</sup> Examples of this include various pronouncements by Pope Pius IX, in which he condemned eighty "errors of the time" in 1864,<sup>28</sup> and the definition of infallibility of the First Vatican Council (1870).<sup>29</sup>

These tendencies continued in the 20th century by condemning the so-called "modernism" and the alleged "Nouvelle Théologie" by the "Holy Office", the later Congregation and then Dicastery for the Catholic Faith. In this context, the first publication of *Codex Iuris Canonici* in 1917 was due to the endeavour to install a legal binding force for the Church as a whole by bringing about unifying norms.

Although these endeavours were softened in form by the Second Vatican Council, they were by no means completely abandoned. The Council opened itself up to dialogue with religions and cultures, accepted the validity of human rights and the "autonomy of earthly realities" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4). Concurrently, the Council insisted, for example, on the authoritative authority of the bishops in all matters of church doctrine and jurisdiction. Quite a few texts of the Council reveal that they emerged from the endeavour to integrate conflicting theological positions and in this way make them acceptable to the majority in the Council chamber. Due to the attempts to hide mutually opposing theological concepts in the adopted texts, it is therefore perhaps even correct to call them "ambiguous". Unsurprisingly, discussions about the correct interpretation of these resolutions and the Council as a whole have not ceased to be disputed to this day.<sup>30</sup>

Against this background, the efforts of the Church's magisterium to avoid ambiguity in the Church's teaching and practice after the Council become understandable. The ambiguity of the post-conciliar liturgical reform, for example, opened up fields of experimental arbitrariness; to counter it, the magisterium issued globally applicable norms for the liturgy. An abundance of statements by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sought to create clarity in controversial questions of doctrine and morals. Popes and Papal Congregations endeavoured to homogenise the doctrine and practice

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Michael Seewald, *Theories of Doctrinal Development in the Catholic Church* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Text in Peter Hünermann and Helmut Hoping (eds.), *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals. Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (San Francisco [CA]: Ignatius Press, 2012), no. 2901-2980 (DH).

<sup>29</sup> DH, no. 3047.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Matthew Lamb and Matthew Levering, *The Reception of Vatican II* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

of the Church, often in a conciliatory manner, but now with an emphatically global perspective.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.3. Pope Francis: A new Ecclesial Culture of Ambiguity?

Under Francis, however, this trend seems to be reversing. Friends and opponents alike often accuse the Pope of leaving much in the dark. Meaning and intention of the now famous footnote 351 in *Amoris Laetitia*, which deals with the admission of remarried divorcees to Eucharistic communion, has been much discussed.<sup>32</sup> The fact that Francis has repeatedly stated that he is not seeking to change the doctrine of the Church, but rather strives for a better pastoral care, not only led to irritation, but also to massive attempts to force the Pope to clarify his statements.<sup>33</sup>

The *Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality, approved by the Pope as a statement of his ordinary magisterium in October 2024, defines the concept of catholicity as “unity in diversity” (no. 38). This diversity can be seen in the diversity of culturally characterised forms of the Church - for example in the liturgy. “The plurality of religions and cultures, the diversity of spiritual and theological traditions, the variety of the gifts of the Spirit and of the tasks of the community, as well as the diversity of age, sex and social affiliation

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<sup>31</sup> This tendency toward homogenization is exemplified by the decisions of Pope Paul VI regarding the regulation of conception (*Humanae vitae*, 1968) and the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry under John Paul II (*Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, 1994). The current struggle for a synodal church is aimed not least at the acceptance of asynchrony in the church: “A synodal style allows local Churches to move at different paces” (*Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality, October 2024, no. 124).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Amoris Laetitia” to Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Consecrated Persons, Christian Married Couples and all the Lay Faithful on Love in the Family* (March 19, 2016), no. 305: “Because of the forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin - which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such - a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end”. The footnote attached to the text states: “In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments”. ([https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html); accessed on March 25, 2025). Referring to his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasises that the Eucharist “is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” (cf. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium” to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World* (November 24, 2013), no. 47, accessed on March 25, 2025, ([https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)).

<sup>33</sup> In September 2016, four cardinals (Walter Brandmüller, Joachim Meisner, Raymond Leo Burke and Carlo Caffarra) wrote a letter of concern to Pope Francis and asked him to clear up five “dubia” referring to the teaching of *Amoris Laetitia*. The authors of the letter perceived a “serious disorientation and great confusion” among the faithful regarding the life and the doctrine of the Church: see <http://www.kath.net/news/57463> (accessed on March 12, 2025).

within the Church, are an invitation to each person to recognise their particular situatedness, resist the temptation of being at the centre, and open oneself to the acceptance of other perspectives” (no. 42). Similar to the polyphony of an orchestra, diversity within the Church enables an exchange that for all can be enriching members of the Church without jeopardising its unity. Stating that “the unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities”, the *Final Document* refers to Pope John Paul II (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 6 January 2001, no. 46). Finally, in his closing address to the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis affirms the experience of the synod members that “it is possible to walk together with our differences without condemning each other”.<sup>34</sup>

This statement undoubtedly depicts an idealised image of the church. It is frequently observed that the Catholic Church is characterised by the presence of structures of considerable power which present a threat to diversity rather than fostering plurality. Accordingly, ambiguity must be eschewed. As was the case in the first half of the 20th century, unambiguity is to be preferred. This applies to both the doctrine of faith and the established norms of ecclesial practice and ethical conduct. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis emphasises “that the confessional must not be a torture chamber but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best”. The Pope continues saying: “A small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties” (no. 44).

Overall viewed, the relationship between religions and ambiguities in doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church remains multifaced. However, if the philosophical insight that the other is a constitutive dimension of one’s own is also to guide the dialogue between religions in order to avoid exclusions and enable peaceful coexistence - what significance than do otherness and ambiguity have in the dialogue between religions?

#### **4. Otherness, Ambiguity and Truth in Interreligious Dialogue**

Not only in literary studies, psychology, sociology and philosophy, but also with regard to the relationships between different religions, the assumption that otherness is a constitutive dimension of individual and collective identity has

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Final Greeting of His Holiness Pope Francis, at the Second Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2-27, 2024), 17<sup>th</sup> General Congregation, on October 26, 2024, accessed on March 12, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/october/documents/20241026-sinodo-vescovi.html>.

been confirmed in many respects in the recent past. The Viennese Protestant theologian Christian Danz, for example, points out the possibility, indeed the necessity, of understanding one's own religious convictions more deeply in the light of alternative religions.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4.1. Parting of the Ways of Jews, Christians, and Muslims

It is now widely acknowledged that the specific forms of Judaism and Christianity that have been established are the result of a mutual influence process. Whilst Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity came to understand their relationship more and more in terms of competition, from a historical perspective, the nature of their relationship can be described more appropriately in terms of an otherness conceived as non-exclusive.<sup>36</sup> The same applies to the correlation between Christianity and Islam. For a long time, this relationship was characterised less by mutual exclusions than by interrelationships, encounter, and exchange.

It is no accident that the earliest texts of Islam do not refer to "Judaism" or "Christianity", but to "Jews" and "Christians". Initially there was no mention of independent religions, but of individual believers. The religion entrusted to all people by God, was in a certain way misguided by individuals and communities, both sides argued. The gap between Islam and Christianity and even paganism was not regarded as unbridgeable. Well educated Muslims seem to have had no reservations about receiving and commenting on scientific and medical works and philosophical texts from ancient Greece – which were often made accessible to them by Christian translators.<sup>37</sup> Cultural otherness is evidently understood here not exclusively, but inclusively.

During the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, Muslim and Christian scholars were in close dialogue with each other. This exchange fertilised internal Islamic debates on theological topics (*kalām*). One example of this is the lively discussion between Islamic scholars about the inaccuracy of the Qur'an. These discussions have clear similarities to the Arian disputes of the 4th century. In the 9th century, the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (813-833) suspected that the

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Christian Danz, Werner Schüssler und Erdmann Sturm (eds.), *Religionstheologie und interreligiöser Dialog* (Internationales Jahrbuch für die Tillich-Forschung, vol. 5, Vienna - Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010). See in particular the contribution of Christian Danz, „Erkundung des Eigenen im Licht des Fremden“, 75-91.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Israel Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998).

idea of the pre-existence of the Qur'an by Christian teachings on the pre-existence of Christ.<sup>38</sup> The caliph himself was in close dialogue with Christian scholars. It is recognisable here that “otherness” in the inclusive sense –namely as an otherness which is willing to learn– is effective as a constitutive dimension of one’s own religious identity.

#### 4.2. *Religious Otherness, Ambiguity and Claims to Truth*

Assuming the validity of Bauer’s hypothesis that human beings demonstrate a heightened propensity towards pacifism when they are prepared to conceptualise and behave with tolerance for ambiguity, this poses a challenge that Christian theology cannot escape. Notwithstanding the wide variety of positions within Christian churches and denominations, the question must be posed: what systematic place may “ambiguity” and “tolerance of ambiguity” claim in a Christian understanding of reality?

The validity of the concept of “ambiguity” within the context of Christianity is a matter that merits rigorous scrutiny. Does Christianity not indispensably require the category of exclusive otherness for its self-assurance, insofar as it makes a decided claim to truth, which as such excludes alternative interpretations of reality?

The German Egyptologist Jan Assmann (1938-2024) has proposed the hypothesis that the advent of biblical monotheism, superseding ancient Egyptian polytheism, coincided with the onset of religious intolerance. In consequence of the so-called “Mosaic turn”, Moses’ anger was directed towards his own people after they had paid homage to the golden calf (cf. Exod. 32). Ever since, a hitherto unknown monopoly on truth has emerged in Israel, turning inwards and outwards in an exclusive and violent way, Assmann argues.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, the German church historian Arnold Angenendt (1934-2021) has observed that, at least in principle, the interpretation of the parable of the tares in the wheat field (cf. Matth. 13:24-30) during the long history of the Church does not align with an ideology of religious purity.<sup>40</sup> Conversely,

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Nahide Bozkurt, “The Caliph Ma’ mūn and the Doctrine of the Createdness of the Qur’ ān”, in *Christliche Gotteslehre im Orient seit dem Aufkommen des Islams bis zur Gegenwart*. Ed. by Martin Tamecke (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2008), 101-112.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Jan Assmann, *The Mosaic Distinction or The Price of Monotheism*, trans. by Robert Savage (Stanford University Press, 2009). See also: Jan Assmann, *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Arnold Angenendt, „Lasst beides wachsen bis zur Ernte“. *Toleranz in der Geschichte des Christentums* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2018). See also Arnold Angenendt, “Christians between Tolerance and Violence in Europe”, in *Religion and Conflict: Essays on the Origins of Religious Conflicts*

the ultimate adjudication concerning matters of faith, belief and behaviour is entrusted to the presiding judge at the culmination of time (cf. Matth. 25). Although Angenendt acknowledges that Christians have not consistently adhered to this parable, it nevertheless serves as a persistent critique of any endeavour to forcibly impose the supposed truth of the Christian faith on those who espouse an alternative interpretation of the world.

The history of Christianity is characterised by a variety of forms of religious tolerance as well as religious intolerance and exclusion. Even the Inquisition did not generally enforce the truth claims of the Church on religious deviants. In contrast to the ideal of religious purity, as embodied by the Albigensians and Cathars in the Middle Ages, the fundamental remit of the Inquisition was to identify and address any perceived deviations from established ecclesiastical doctrine and praxis. Thus, the fundamental objective of the Inquisition was not the establishment of a church that would be characterised by its unalloyed and absolute purity; rather, its establishment was intended to serve as a preventative measure against the church's potential deviation. From a historical perspective, however, it appears that the Inquisition did not consistently adhere to the scriptural guidance outlined in the Gospels. As a matter of fact, it is evident that the Inquisition's proceedings were frequently misused and abused as a means to serve secular interests.<sup>41</sup>

To what extent, then, does the Christian claim to truth and validity determine the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions?

#### 4.3. *Christian Claims to Truth and Interreligious Dialogue*

Following centuries of radical rejection, the Second Vatican Council initiated a series of dialogues with non-Christian religions in a manner that was not anticipated. Nevertheless, this did not preclude the Council from formulating unambiguous pronouncements on the salvific mediation of Jesus Christ. In *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2, the council fathers state: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men".

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*and on Resolution Approaches*. Ed. by Erik Eynikel and Eberhard Bons (London: Harpree Publ., 2011), 49-62.

<sup>41</sup> This comment is not intended to justify violent inquisition proceedings. However, today's image of the Inquisition and its procedures is largely determined not by historical research but the criticism of the Enlightenment. Cf. Gerd Schwerhoff, *Die Inquisition: Ketzerverfolgung in Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Munich: Beck, 2004), 121-127, on the "Myth of the Inquisition".

Having said this, the Declaration continues as follows: “Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18s)”.

It would be illusory to claim that all religious people must abandon their respective beliefs to overcome hostility and to embrace otherness. Consequently, the hypothesis has been proposed that the capacity of religions involved in political affairs to coexist peacefully is not dependent on any renunciation of truth. To achieve a resolution to present tensions, the focus should be directed towards the arguments derived from religious traditions that are employed to provide a justification for political claims. It is imperative that these arguments are given serious consideration in order to overcome violent opposition and promote a fruitful exchange between adherents of different religions, even in cases where there are and persist opposing interests.

Adherents of various faiths usually assert the validity of specific religious conducts and practices for themselves, often without much introspection. Nevertheless, within the context of discourse between adherents of differing religious traditions, it is not the mere practice in itself that is significant; rather, it is the underlying rationale that is of importance. Moreover, the personal testimonies and practices of devout individuals reinforce the respective arguments. The interchange of concepts and the dissemination of spiritual customs can engender reciprocal comprehension among individuals of differing religious convictions. The symbolism inherent in human existence, as well as the symbolism of language, has the capacity to establish human connections and to bridge the differences between religious communities.

Spiritual dialogue facilitates communication among individuals of different religious affiliations despite the persistent differences that exist between them in terms of language and culture.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in the context of interreligious dialogue, the witness of personal engagement and pious practice in different religions serves to relativise any scepticism regarding the possibility of transcultural understanding.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Twenty-five years after *Nostra Aetate*, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, in *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (issued on May 19, 1991), distinguishes four forms of dialogue, without claiming to establish among them any order of priority: a) The dialogue of life, b) The dialogue of action, c) The dialogue of theological exchange, and d) The dialogue of religious experience (no. 42), accessed on March 12, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/interelg/documents/rc\\_pc\\_interelg\\_doc\\_19051991\\_dialogue-and-proclamatio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today”, in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*. Ed. by Mike Featherstone and Scott M. Lash (London: Sage, 1999), 194-213.

In the context of inter-religious and secular-worldview interaction, the arduous process of attaining reciprocal understanding is imperative for comprehending the others' concerns, respecting them, and, optimally, deriving personal benefits from their perspectives. It is only through this process of struggle that individuals can enhance their self-awareness from an external perspective. Moreover, this approach enables the acceptance of otherness as a contributing factor and potentially enriching element, rather than perceiving it as a menace to one's own identity.

Struggling for mutual understanding enables faithful citizens to integrate the content of religious traditions effectively into public discourse.<sup>44</sup> The possible contribution of religions to society is not merely an issue concerning the specific content of religious beliefs; rather, it extends to encompass what is appropriate for all people and what is conducive to humanity. Religious perspectives frequently feature in societal discourse. From a theological perspective, the following questions are posited: Upon which foundation does the concept of human rights lie? Are human rights derived exclusively from divine revelations or also from autonomous human reason? What do religions say about the equality of men and women - not only in terms of their dignity, but also in terms of their rights and duties? What is the relationship between religious truth and freedom of opinion? Should individuals be permitted to act in accordance with their personal moral compass, even when such actions are at odds with the established ethical, religious or cultural tenets of their society? Should they be permitted to select their affiliations to ideological and religious groups even when such groups appear to compromise the fundamental principles upon which society is based?

The provision of answers to such questions is a challenging endeavour. A constructive approach could be to facilitate open debate on the respective topics, both within religious communities and with members of other religions and secular world views. The diversity of potential responses to all these questions can be esteemed as an indication of elements that may have been overlooked in one's own deliberations. Nevertheless, such a positive evaluation can only be promoted if otherness is not perceived as a threat to one's own identity and ambiguity is regarded as a positive asset. It is only through such a process that a pluralistic society can successfully overcome politics of exclusion and benefit from the insights of others.

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Paul J. Weithmann, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jürgen Habermas, "Glauben und Wissen", in *Zeitdiagnosen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 249-263.

#### 4.4. *God's Transcendence and the Otherness of Religions*

In discussing their faith with other religious traditions and secular worldviews, Christians are invited to demonstrate a willingness to learn from the other. Such an attitude is underpinned by the conviction that the God they worship, even when He manifests Himself in some way, is always beyond the capacity of human beings to fully comprehend.<sup>45</sup>

The concept of the divine as completely separate from any created reality is a common belief among Christians and members of almost all religious communities worldwide. This leads to a fundamental modesty in language and confession. Modesty does not mean, however, that God is the “other” about whom no one can know or say anything. Christians are convinced that the almighty God has revealed himself to human beings in the history of the people of Israel and in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in such a way that they can make positive and true statements about him. Nonetheless, it is important to note that such statements are not only inherently limited in their capacity to comprehend God’s essence; they are also inherently provisional in nature.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that, from a Christian perspective, revelation is an act of communication and profound freedom. Consequently, revelation must not be conceived as a static entity, but rather as a dynamic process that initiates a history that is still unfolding.<sup>46</sup>

The discourse between Christians, Jews and Muslims has the potential to evoke a sense of the ineffable nature of God. The notion of God’s transcendence is not diminished by the fact that Christians perceive Jesus of Nazareth as the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).<sup>47</sup> It is an irrefutable tenet of Christianity that God has revealed himself through Christ: “He who sees me sees the Father” (John 14:9) or “the one who sent me” (John 12:45). Concurrently, adherents of Christianity also concede that the Father’s recognition is exclusively reserved for the Son (cf. Matth. 11:27). According to Christian doctrine, access to the triune reality of God –and this concept is central to delineating the fundamental difference between Christians and Jews, as well as Muslims– is personally mediated. However, it is precisely in

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<sup>45</sup> God transcends all human reasoning; he is “maior quam cogitari possit”: Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, cap. 15, in *Opera omnia*, vol. 1. Ed. by F. S. Schmitt (Stuttgart: Fromann 1938, reprint 1984), 112<sub>13</sub>.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Thomas Pröpper, “Freiheit als philosophisches Prinzip theologischer Hermeneutik“, in *Evan-gelium und freie Vernunft. Konturen einer theologischen Hermeneutik* (Freiburg - Basel - Wien: Her-der, 2001), 5-22.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Christoph Schönborn, *God's Human Face: The Christ Icon* (San Francisco [CA]: Ignatius Press, 2011).

this personal mediation that the danger of measuring God according to human standards is countered. The notion of a personal counterpart is, by its very nature, beyond comprehension.

Within the domain of interpersonal interactions, no individual human being can ever be regarded as wholly transparent to another. This phenomenon also pertains to the realm of the divine. Because God has revealed Himself in the history of Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth as unconditional freedom, His Triune nature remains inaccessible to human understanding. Even and especially in his revelation, God remains an unfathomable mystery that Christians are called to pursue in word and deed throughout their lives.<sup>48</sup>

Conceiving God as an enduring transcendent being, even in his revelations, serves to remove the basis for any theological or religious exclusivism. Despite the insistence among Christians that the ultimate revelation of God is manifest within the Holy Bible, it is inevitable that divergent interpretations of Holy Scriptures will emerge, and that these divergent interpretations will become pervasive. As a consequence, ambiguities in Christian doctrine and practice will occur, which will relativise any attempt at absolute othering.

## 5. Conclusion: Learning from Otherness and Ambiguity

What does all this mean for the Christian approach to otherness in religion and society? The undeniable plurality of religions and worldviews does not require Christians to fundamentally question their religious identity and claim to truth.<sup>49</sup> Recognizing the fact that the identity of Christians is not only rooted in their own religious traditions and doctrines but is also enhanced by dialogue and exchange with other people of good will, Christians are able and should be willing to engage in dialogue with adherents of non-Christian religions and world views. Their confidence will be nourished by the prospect

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. John J. Mawhinney, "The Concept of Mystery in Karl Rahner's Philosophical Theology", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 24 (1968): 17-30; Stephen J. Duffy, "Experience of Grace". In *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*. Ed. by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 43-62.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical "*Fratelli Tutti*" on *Fraternity and Social Friendship* (October 3, 2020): "Just as there can be no dialogue with 'others' without a sense of our own identity, so there can be no openness between peoples except on the basis of love for one's own land, one's own people, one's own cultural roots. I cannot truly encounter another unless I stand on firm foundations, for it is on the basis of these that I can accept the gift the other brings and in turn offer an authentic gift of my own. I can welcome others who are different, and value the unique contribution they have to make, only if I am firmly rooted in my own people and culture" (no. 143), accessed on March 12, 2025, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

that their own religious self-understanding and practice will be enriched by this dialogue.<sup>50</sup>

Christians should not expect from these conversations an uncritical confirmation of the truth entrusted to them. Rather, they can confidently assume that the triune God has revealed himself to human beings in a variety of ways, including nature, moral behaviour, and ritual conduct of non-Christian religions. Consequently, Christians have the opportunity to gain valuable insights into their own faith through constructive engagement with non-Christians, even if they are confronted in this engagement with incomprehension, contradiction or even rejection. The Second Vatican Council, in its dogmatic constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, addresses the concept of “signs of the time” (no. 4), which instruct Christians to achieve a more profound understanding of their own faith and to act in accordance with it. It is widely recognised that interreligious dialogue, in all of its four dimensions, can be regarded as a significant contemporary phenomenon, which can be seen as a “sign of the time”.

The willingness to acquire knowledge from others can encourage introspection and the thoughtful examination of one’s own perspective. This assertion is widely accepted. From a Christian standpoint, this suggests that in the encounter with the other, Christians can find something that is meaningful and helpful for themselves and their own faith. This willingness to learn from the perspective of others by no means does necessitate the renunciation of the Christian claim to truth.

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<sup>50</sup> An example that may be given of this confidence is that of Christian de Chergé, the Prior of the Cistercian community of Tibhirine, Algeria. De Chergé and six of his fellow monks were assassinated in 1996. De Chergé saw his monastic vocation as a call to be a person of prayer among persons who pray, that is, among the Muslim friends and neighbours with whom he and his brothers shared daily life. Cf. Christian Salenson, *Christian De Cherge: A Theology of Hope* (Kentucky: Cistercian Publications, 2012).

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