

Religious Autonomy Today – The Heteronomy of a Christian –

*Whoever wants to enter beatitude
can achieve that now, in this world, freely and easily.
Help from organized religion cannot be expected in this.
But if somebody is determined to effectively enter the "Kingdom of God",
then no human, no system, no circumstances will be able to stop her/him.*

Luther has translated the bible into German language. This looks as if he had, for some length, paved the way towards religious autonomy for all people. For, at latest with the spread of the Luther bible, the Germans have, in principle, no longer been dependent on being told what the bible is saying, but have been able to read it themselves, and to scrutinize what they are being told about it. Today, the same is true for virtually all people and all languages.

The 500th anniversary of Luther's Reformation provides good reason for reviewing whether this direction has been taken further, and how far it has led us since. Do we have religious autonomy today, or at least more than back then? And is it an issue at all?

Basics

Autonomy, with respect to a stance, means to be able to take and keep it on grounds of one's own potentials, of one's own knowledge and competence. Accordingly, with respect to genuine religion, that is: the individual connection to God, autonomy means to be able to achieve and sustain one's connection to God on grounds of one's own knowledge and competence. One can bring oneself before God, and be there. We guess it already: Rather nobody is living this, and it is rather not an issue. Very well an issue is the search for God, but rather nobody has ever reported to have found God definitely, and in which way he can be found. Christians may possibly counter that they believe to have found God in the person of his son Christ. But that actually means that they are not seeing themselves directly before God. If there is real searching for God then it is obviously not effective.

Furthermore, autonomy means that one can freely decide about one's stance, including to leave it. It is clear that one cannot have a stance vis-a-vis a being without any kind of perception of it. The mode of our connection to God can be circumscribed as a kind of

"seeing with the inner eye". And as we don't decide whether, what we are seeing, is a car – for we just immediately see the car –, so we can't decide to see God. Either we are seeing God, or not. If we have seen God once, we cannot annihilate the experience. If somebody cannot see God, then this person may be autonomous, but not religiously autonomous.

Connection to God from one's own knowledge and competence does not mean that we are left to acquire them by our own efforts. Fellow men can, in principle, help to achieve them. Nevertheless, in the end, one's own religion is not dependent on any other human, rather we are ourselves knowing and seeing God. This should not be mistaken as religious subjectivism. It is not sufficient to construct a personal scheme of religion and be enthused about it. Warnings against "private religion" are appropriate insofar. But everybody warning against religious autonomy is actually striving for religious dependency.

Understanding the Bible and Systems of Religion

Actually it may be a long way to go from understanding the language of old Bible texts – or other religious reference texts – to understanding the connection of man to God. It cannot even be taken for sure from the outset that the latter understanding can possibly be extracted from the texts and, if so, in which way and to which extent – after all this has been tried for two millennia –; and it is not obvious how to get on, should the texts not lend themselves to reach the goal. Then one may still follow ideas to look into oneself for the kingdom of God, or to see God in nature, and there are paths of meditation. But these approaches may only carry for a limited distance. A really comprehensive understanding must cover and integrate both, these approaches and those of the Bible, and then quite some more.

On the other hand, Luther's – questionable – claim has been that the Bible alone is already saying everything due to be said about the justification of man before God, and that this justification is the bottom line of man's connection to God.

The question remains: Where are we today in understanding the Bible? The Christian denominations have, from the bible, derived large systems of teachings about the one God and his kingdom. Each of them is claiming to have the truth, but their teachings are diverging as widely as to expose plain contradictions. The differences are even being actively maintained and highlighted, and, in this way, each denomination tries to distinguish itself from the others.

Now, this is just how life is: If we have before us many propositions about the same matter, that are irreconcilably contradicting each other, then we *must* hypothesize that none of them is true. The members of the denominations of religion apparently are not the least taken aback by the fact that different "truths" are being held about God. As it has been impossible over millennia to resolve the issue of the "truth" of God, a layperson will not dare that either, but end up following some "truth" from the environment and swim with it – and then the want of clarification is gone. Religious autonomy looks much different.

The denominations of religion are large systems consisting of hierarchies of clerics; of teachings based on reference texts, that usually are glorifying a founder; of commandments, rules, ritual forms, buildings, works of art, sub-organizations, specialized departments, administrations, educational and social institutions, regular organized events, laymen, all with inner structures, external relations, goals and histories. Decisions about the teachings are reserved to the clerics. The theologians are their experts knowing what has been written about a specific "truth" of God during the last tens of centuries.

Within a system of this type one may move for a lifetime and never encounter God. It is inevitable to get lost in it and thus to forget to search for God and to guide people to God.

Religious "Truths" and Reason

As a layperson, one cannot but take what the system is offering. Let us look at some Christian propositions meant to be "truths" of God – other denominations of religion are showing comparable propositions. Their common claim is that they are higher truths, taking precedence over and, as the case may be, overruling inner-worldly truths.

Everybody knows that no human can be born without an impregnation, that no human can revive after death, that no human can enforce any deviation from laws of nature, and that a certain teaching cannot be trusted as long as many deviating and contradicting alternatives are being perpetuated, and the controversy has not been resolved. In order to gain or be granted access to the "truth" of God, we are being asked to give up, to some extent, our own, proven knowledge of the world.

One must also give up logic to some extent, because a virgin birth does not imply that the baby is divine; a resurrection from death does not imply the divinity of the resurrected; and generally, from the occurrence of a miracle one can never derive that it had a divine cause – because a coincidence just isn't the same as a causal relation.

Likewise, one can plainly forget the demand for structural transparency: how a petitionary prayer can lead to its claimed effect; why any code of sins should be valid; how the absolution from sins for other people through the death of Jesus should be functioning; what eternity should have to do with infinite time; how the resurrection of the dead should happen in all detail: for all this, plausible explanations do not exist, and aren't usually asked for.

Finally one should rather not expect contemporary language. Predominant is the exegesis of old texts and pictures as if there couldn't be any current ones matching the purpose. One is invited to put oneself into a well-herded sheep, that is, into a gregarious animal of limited intelligence and rather strange to most people. For our modern, dynamic society, a code of ethics is being propagated, that had been developed for a static society at a time when most of the current fields of ethics were far from existing. God is being positioned as a kind of wise and good lord or king – a long past role that nobody knows anymore today – and thus is not only being presented through an inept picture but moreover as an unknown and inaccessible figure which, on top of all, requires unconditional obedience. –

If their respective reference texts would be taken away from the teachers of organized religion then nothing would remain that they had to say about God.

Our proven knowledge of the world, logic, our legitimate demands for structural transparency, and contemporary language: these are aspects of our common, personal – if not religious – autonomy. We are being asked by the denominations of religion to give up autonomy in the above, and thousand other, cases if we want access to the "truth" of God from them.

Many people, who aren't willing to give away reason for the Christian religious offering, take this as sufficient reason to turn away. The Christian responses to this are of the following kind: that you cannot find God through reason; that many of the texts are to be taken as metaphorical or as legends. They may be pointing out that we should rather do something for our salvation than risk eternal damnation; that their communities are offering safety and love. – That is sufficient for the members, but not for those who turn away; to whom the metaphors don't carry anything and the legends do not appeal; who take eternal damnation as an empty threat; and who find security and love themselves.

Propositions about God

But let us continue to look at Christian propositions offered as "truths" of God, and now directly referring to God. Common are propositions like: God is great, the highest, almighty, full of grace, or to be feared; that God is the originator of commandments and interdictions, and that certain texts are originating from, or inspired by, him; that God has a will, but still allows evil in the world, but is punishing evil as well; finally – and of outstanding importance for the Christians – that he has one and only one son, sent him into the world, etc.

The Christian, as well as the other abrahamic denominations of religion are unanimously proclaiming that God is not graspable, but they are nevertheless maintaining all kinds of propositions about God, as if it weren't God who is not graspable, but only and occasionally his decisions and actions. They are proclaiming that God is not from this world, but they are still making propositions about God, as if our ability to conceptually grasp something weren't restricted to the world. They are proclaiming that God is absolute, but they are making propositions about him in spite, as if the absolute could, as propositions are inherently doing, be put into various factual relations, that is: relativized.

To believe that one could, with conceptual propositions, relate to a conceptually non-graspable, extra-worldly, absolute God: that is a delusion, as the Second Commandment has been knowing long ago. And if one tries to grasp the connection of man to God in the scope of conceptual propositions and, to this end, reads the religious contents of the Bible as propositions – note: the critical-historic method is doing this, too – then one cannot understand either of them, neither the connection of man to God nor the bible.

As mentioned above, it is no new idea that the contents of the Bible must not be taken as propositions, but that they are meant "symbolically", as legends, like myths or fairy tales;

as texts that one can only get into if one finds a resonance in one's own life. This may possibly lead forward, if the symbolic opens itself up to a person, but as soon as one uses them in any logical or practical deductions, for example, draws conclusions, or produces reasons, then one has already taken them as compositions of conceptual propositions and thus discarded any possible symbolic meaning.

One may consider the Ten Commandments as appropriate, one may meditate on them, and understand them as fundamental. But if one is saying, they are from God, and must *therefore* be obeyed, and everybody transgressing them is acting against God's will and has to fear God's punishment and can only hope for his grace, then one is already moving on the level of conceptual logic, and the subject is no longer the non-conceptual, extra-worldly, absolute God.

The representation "son of God" is an apposite and highly valuable picture for the divine aspect of man. But to project this divinity exclusively onto one single man, Jesus Christ, means, at the same time, to deny all other humans this very divinity. And saying even that this Jesus Christ were the one and only one son of God, "anointed", that is endued with God's authority, *therefore* our lord, whom we are bound to obey, notably the orders he gave according to the New Testament, etc., then all of these are inner-worldly, truth-claiming propositions, and such propositions can never have anything to do with the non-conceptual, extra-worldly, absolute God. They are void talk.

The monotheistic denominations of religion are believing that they were standing on a safe fundament of propositions about God, while they are depending on a conceptual, inner-worldly, relative "propositions-God", that is: a mental fiction. With every single proposition about God, they are missing the absolute God. And nobody raises his voice against this, or only notices it. People take it as sufficient connection to God, if they belong to a group that defines itself by a set of propositions using the word "God".

But if God is that massively being missed then this means: nobody perceives how the Bible is pointing to God; nobody "understands" the connection to God as shown in the Bible; nobody is "seeing" God. And this renders entirely meaningless to insist in the principle "sola scriptura", that already the Bible alone be sufficient and authoritative for our connection to God. A Bible not understood by anybody is of no use at all in this respect.

The Culture of God-Avoidance

All this is intentional and systematic, though, and the system is prospering. The religious elites have been guiding billions of members towards the propositions-God, and billions of members have been believing in this propositions-God for millennia. That a system of this type and size can endure implies that there must be a giant demand for it. That is: God proper is not being missed unawares, but everybody wants to avoid him safely and permanently.

It seems likely that this could be explained by a fundamental trait of human being. Actually, there is a very old reference to such a trait of God-avoidance, namely in the

Genesis book of the Bible: in the episode in which Adam and Eve are hiding from God after recognizing that they are naked. That can be read in the way that man, in his/her naked existence, is inherently shying away from being before God. The Dasein philosophy is describing this trait of Dasein neutrally and unemotionally: We are falling for the world, we are allowing the world to occupy our attention that completely, that we do not even want to know that and how we could get a sight of something else – the extra-worldly. And therefore we do not know anything about it, cannot get a sight of it, and do not want it.

To avoid God: that is zero religious autonomy. That is total religious heteronomy. That is notorious ignorance of the teachings of Jesus – if not treachery against Jesus. And that is the situation today, organizationally consolidated over past millennia and, as it appears, for further millennia or even for all future, because it is the – if not cogent – expression of a fundamental trait of our Dasein, that is indeed unalterable. All people are all the time dancing around the Golden Calf, today no longer golden but made of propositions. And thus they are obviously proceeding on the wrong path.

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Utopian Supplement

Taken precisely, the problem is not that we would not have any chance against the fundamental disposition of our Dasein here, that is, the strong attraction of the world. We can indeed surrender to the world, but we can also be thrown back from the world to ourselves, or we can by ourselves step back from, and keep a distance to, the world. The problem is that, practically, all of us are having negative associations attached to this, shying away from it, or even fearing it, and that we are confirming each other in this attitude. Still, no individual is bound to take part in this.

In principle, everybody is free in striving to get a sight of God and, in principle, everybody can get and maintain such a sight temporarily – and subsequently refresh it time and again (as the Third Commandment is advising to do). Above all, this pays off. One will then see how it is to be before God. One will see how Dasein is laid-out and how to best position oneself in it – and, in particular, avoid wearisome stances. One will see the inherent purpose of Dasein, and realize that one has so far tried to persist in the "Dasein game" without knowing the purpose and the rules. And one will see that there is nothing to shy away from or to fear, but rather that our Dasein situation is exceedingly good, and that we can be glad about it.

Still, rather nobody manages to get into this stance. And if somebody succeeded, then he be warned: He is solitary, and then it is futile and dangerous to advocate religious autonomy against the established, pervasive God-avoidance of the general public. One really has to leave it to God to open their eyes.

Perhaps a new Luther will, nevertheless, show up some day to progress mankind one step forward again – who will, with all cleverness and prudence, convince many people, that there cannot be "truths" about God but that God can be perceived. Then everybody will see that religious fundamentalism is without fundamentals. Christians would have to give up many propositions about God, too, but most important, the teachings of Jesus would remain, and Christology could be newly read – relectures are fashionable today – in the sense that all propositions about Christ are pointing to the Divine Self of man. Christology would thereby actually become upvalued. It would regain its existential meaning and its connection to the teachings of Jesus.

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