

Truth in the Context of Christian Faith and its Relation to Other Religions

Reinhold Bernhardt¹

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In the following reflections on the understanding of truth in regard to Christian faith (or even in regard to religious faith, experience, and language in general), I advocate a relational interpretation of truth. Truth in that sense is understood not primarily as an intellectual assertion but as a qualification of a dynamic, existential, personal relation. Truth is the trustworthiness of that relation and of the person to whom it relates. I distinguish that interpretation from two other types: from the understanding of truth as the rightness and validity of a proposition, and from depicting truth as a qualification of a certain faith or religion as a whole. Contrary to those concepts, a relational understanding of truth is open to a plurality of perceptions of truth without leading to relativism.

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Three Types of Truth

A *propositional* understanding of truth qualifies certain religious statements (propositions) as being true. An *ontological* understanding can be used to qualify a whole religious belief-system as true in contrast to other religious belief-systems. An *existential* understanding qualifies the personal relation to God as true (without implying necessarily that other relations to God are false). In those three approaches the meaning

1. Professor and dean, the Theological Faculty of Basel University, Switzerland (Reinhold.Bernhardt@unibas.ch).

of the term “true” is not univocal. The different meanings become obvious when one asks for the contrasting terms.

Contrast-terms of the propositional understanding of religious truth are “error” or “lie” or “heresy.” Contrast-terms of the ontological understanding are “false religion,” “unbelief,” “faithlessness,” “apostasy,” “blindness,” or “hardness of heart.” Contrast-terms of the existential understanding are “sin” (in a meta-moral sense), “estrangement,” “meaninglessness of life,” “falling short of existential fulfilment,” and so on.

Those three understandings of truth—the propositional, the ontological and the existential—are not mutually exclusive. The existential understanding can adopt the ontological and the propositional in order to articulate its certainties but also goes beyond it. It refers to the basic life-orientation of its “holder” in relation to God and not mainly to modes of articulation of religious beliefs. Or, to put it differently, it refers to “being in faith” vis-a-vis “having religion.”

Propositional Truth

Propositional truth is related to assertions and thus to language. In the first instance, it refers to statements about empirical states of affairs and can be verified by observation. But in many cases, an observation is not possible, because the state of affairs to which the proposition relates lies in the past or on a level of reality which is not accessible by sense perception—like the realm of quantum physics. In such cases, other modes of verification need to be used, like historical research on the basis of written or oral documents, or physical research on the basis of experimental arrangements. Verifications of that kind can lead solely to a lesser or higher degree of probability, and not to solid knowledge. The truth-claim of the proposition holds as long as there are no propositions which could be proven to be entitled to claiming a higher degree of probability.

The same applies to propositions of a more general scope, like “all-sentences” (“all ice bears are white”) or rules on functional relations (“if p then q”). They cannot become verified in a strict sense, because it is not possible to get knowledge of all the instances which are covered by the all-sentence or the rule. Here, the principle of falsification needs to be applied: such propositions can claim to be true as long as no instances are discovered which contradict them.

It is not just the propositions on single empirical states of affairs and on general functional relations that belong to that concept of truth. Purely intra-mental rational operations (like in mathematical derivations) can also lead to true statements. In such cases, the truth-claim cannot be verified by empirical verification; it needs to be substantiated in purely logical ways. What is crucial here is not correspondence with empirical reality but the coherence of the rational path of thought in the context of the intellectual system. The formal correctness in applying logical principles leads to true propositions.

Propositional truth is binary. It follows an either-or distinction and can assume only a positive or a negative truth value. According to the principle of non-contradiction, it cannot allow for a plurality of truths. If there is a conflict between truth-claims of that kind only one of them can be true. If p is true, q must be false.

Contradictory propositions might both be true only in the case that they are located on different levels or are related to different perspectives. The statement that “a car was approaching from the right side” can be as true as the statement that “the (same) car was approaching from the left side,” if we consider the different positions and perspectives of the two observers. But if there is only one observer, if there is no difference of perspectives, there cannot be a plurality of true statements referring to the same state of affairs.

In the context of religion (like in the context of ethics, aesthetics, political opinions, and so on), the propositional understanding of truth can be applied only in regard to *factual* statements (like the statement that “Jesus is crucified”). But when it comes to judgements on *meaning*, *relevance*, and *value* (like in the expression that “Jesus’ death has a salvific effect”), truth cannot be claimed in the same theoretical and objective sense.

That insight was already gained in the history of theology, like in Luther’s distinction between *certitudo* and *securitas*¹, but became crucial in the 19th century, like in David Friedrich Strauß’ distinction between the mythic (faith-related, kerygmatic) and the historic (fact-related) strands within the New Testament (Strauß 2012). Albrecht Ritschl adopted the distinction between theoretical knowledge statements and practical value judgements in the second and third editions of the third volume of his main work *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* and interpreted religious knowledge as a certain type of value judgement (*Werturteil*) (see Ritschl 1870-1910, vol. III⁴, §27f., 84-201). „Das religiöse Erkennen bewegt sich in selbstständigen Werthurtheilen, welche sich auf die Stellung des Menschen zur Welt beziehen, und Gefühle von Lust oder Unlust hervorrufen, in denen der Mensch entweder seine durch Gottes Hilfe bewirkte Herrschaft über die Welt genießt, oder die Hilfe Gottes zu jenem Zweck schmerzlich entbehrt“ (195).² In philosophy, the

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1. See Schrimm-Heins (1990) and Basse (1993, 166ff). In his careful study, Basse states that Luther’s distinction between appropriate certainty and false security is not clearly expressed with the terms “certainty” (“certitudo,” “Gewissheit”) and “security” (“securitas,” “Sicherheit”), because there are passages in Luther’s later works in which he uses both terms synonymously (Basse 1993, 170, footnote 24).
 2. “Religious knowledge comprises independent value judgements, which are related to the relation of humans to the world, and evoke sensations of (religious) pleasure or unpleasure: pleasure of enjoying God’s guidance, unpleasure of lacking it” (my translation).

Heidelberg-school of Neo-Kantianism (especially Hermann Lotze) emphasized axiological (evaluative) reflection over against the fact-asserting (onto-theoretical) propositions and related the two types of truths to the two groups of academic disciplines: natural sciences and humanities (Krijnen 2006, 287-300).

One of the main conflicts between “orthodox” (like Evangelical) theologies and those which are called “liberal” was sparked by the question on how to understand biblical statements. For example, on the divine status of Jesus and the exercise of divine power by him. Are they to be understood as asserting supra-natural facts, based on the knowledge of the divine revelation, or as confessions of faith in the experienced “truth” of the *kerygma*? In spelling out the existential understanding of truth below, I will follow the second—kerygmatic—interpretation, which can express itself also in an assertive way, but requires a different hermeneutics in understanding those assertions: not as asserting facts but as confessing the trustworthiness of God’s promise.

All the Christian confessions of faith consist of statements which claim to be true in a propositional sense. That Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, that he was crucified for our salvation, that he arose again from the dead and ascended into heaven, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead, are truth-claims at the heart of the Christian faith. But they are not to be understood as objective assertions of supernatural facts but as expressions of the relation to God as it is experienced in a faithful life, summarized in confessions of faith and reflected in theological reasoning.

Ontological (or Essential) Understanding of Truth

While the *propositional* understanding of truth refers to the truth value of assertions—be it in relation to the empirical reality or in relation to other statements in the context of an intellectual system—the

ontological understanding relates the phenomenal appearance of objects or states of affairs to their true being or essence (*quiddity*). Truth, according to that idealistic understanding, is not attributed to language but to the “idea” or “nature” or “substance” of existing realities. It means authenticity, genuineness, or veritableness.

Essential truth can be attributed to the *process* of discovering (or unveiling) the truth (ἀλήθεια, *aletheia*) and to the *result* of that process: seeing “clearly” the unveiled truth as the essential kernel of a certain thing or state of affairs. In our daily language, we employ that concept of truth by qualifying something as “true,” like “true love” (as opposed to a merely pretended love) or “true gold” (as opposed to an imitation). Truth means the compliance of an experienced phenomenon with an ideal as the ontological fullness of that phenomenon.

In the context of religion, this understanding of truth appears in creedal statements (like in the Chalcedonian creed, according to which Jesus Christ is “truly God and truly Man”), but it can also become extended to refer to a religion as a whole. In the speech Paul gave on the Areopagus in Athens, he proclaimed the true name and nature of God (Acts 17:16-34). In his essay *De vera religione* (390), Augustine depicts Christianity as the true religion over against Manichaeism and even over against Neoplatonism which he regards to be closer to the divine truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Also in the dogmatic writings of Lutheran theologians in the second half of the 17th century, Christianity was predicated as *religio vera* and set in opposition to superstitious *religiones falsae* (Calov 1685, C.2; König 1664, §57f.; Quenstedt 1685, I.2).

While propositional truth-claims can be employed to qualify beliefs of one’s own religion (like the belief that Jesus’ death has a salvific effect) as true by (positively) relating them to divine revelation, ontological truth-claims can be used to qualify the whole religion as true by (negatively) relating it to other religions. In this usage, they are

comparative (or even competitive) by their very nature. They take the plurality of religions as the starting point but respond to it in an apologetic way.

Especially from the Enlightenment on, the term “religion” was used as a general collective term, which overarched the different historical religions. In his dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing declared the quest for the true religion to be answered only eschatologically. Hegel und Schleiermacher went beyond that containment and developed arguments for prizing Christianity to be the “absolute religion.” That claim was now understood in a comparative and inclusive sense rather than in an exclusive one. In order to substantiate it, Hegel proceeded in two steps: at first he defined the essence of religion in general. Religion is

the standpoint of the consciousness of the true; ([it is] the consciousness of the most completely universal speculative content as such), not of something that is true, not of this or that, not of something that on one side is still finite and untrue, but rather of the absolutely true, of the universal, of the absolutely self-determining true that has being in and for itself. But this absolutely self-determining true *is* only as an idea. (Hegel 1988, 205)

Religion is the self-consciousness of absolute spirit mediated in and through finite consciousness. Secondly, he identified Christianity as the consummate or absolute religion, because in the incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus the cleavage of the human self-consciousness from God, from itself, and from nature is reconciled. As long as humanity’s true nature is not realized, it exists in a state of untruth (Hegel 1988, 437). In Jesus, the “true Man,” that nature is revealed. The alienation of the subjective spirit from God as the absolute spirit, which is experienced as “evil” or “misery” (Hegel 1988, 447) is overcome. In Christianity, the absolute spirit came to its highest self-manifestation (see Mooren 2018).

In *The Christian Faith in Outline* §§ 7-13, Schleiermacher develops a normative typology of religions, which depicts Christianity as the realisation of the essence of religion. That essence consists in the mediation between divine and finite reality. It is realized in Christ as the mediator of God.

Throughout the 19th century, many approaches were presented to prove Christianity to be the true (in terms of the highest developed) religion. They culminated in Ernst Troeltsch's reflections on the absoluteness of Christianity (Troeltsch 1998). And even Karl Barth, who criticized Troeltsch harshly, regarded Christianity as the true religion. But he insisted that such a predication is not justified by any quality inherent in this religion; rather, it is an undeserved gift of God that this religion was elected to bear the name of Christ—in analogy to the justification of the sinner out of pure grace (Barth 1956, §17.3).

Obviously, the ontological understanding of truth does not allow for a plurality of truths on an equal level. It locates *the* truth in the essence of things and states of affairs and relates the different manifestations of that essence in terms of a hierarchy of realisations to it. The more they manifest the essence the closer they come to *the* truth and the higher their value is. Applied to religions, that leads to a hierarchical array: some religions (or types of religions) may be regarded as mere superstition, to others a lower or higher value can be attributed, but none reaches the quality of the consummate religion.

Relational-Existential Truth

The third conception of truth, which I term the relational-existential model, attributes “truth” in the first instance neither to religious propositions nor to religious phenomena nor religions as a whole but to the existential relation of the believer to the transcendent ground of being. That relational understanding of truth seems to me to be most

relevant for a theology of religions.¹ I characterize it by four terms: relational, existential, personal, and dynamic.

Relational

According to this model, religious truth is not conceived of in terms of a doctrinal concept of revelation knowledge about supra-natural facts (as it could be the case in the propositional model) nor as identifying an essence of religion (like in the ontological model). It is tied not to the belief in theological assertions or doctrines but expresses the promised and realized quality of the relation to God, which is constituted by God alone: God's relation to creation, to humans, to his "people," and to the individual person. First and foremost, it means certainty and trust in the reliability of God's promise.

The Hebrew word for truth, "*emet*" (אמת), already signifies the faithfulness and steadiness of God, the reliability of his covenant, and the fidelity and commitment of God to his pledge. In the Gospel of John, we find a similar understanding. Truth here does not mean inerrancy of supra-natural knowledge, the rightness of religious propositions, or claiming that the Christian religion is the true religion. It means the proclamation of the reliability of God's promise to grant community with Godself mediated by Jesus Christ (see Landmesser 1999, especially 107-53). That comes close to the understanding of truth in the above quoted passage from the declaration "Dialogue and Proclamation," which states that truth is not a thing which one can "have" and a claim which one can raise against others, but it is a personal relation by whom we must allow ourselves to be possessed.

1. In my understanding it complies to depicting the Qur'an as *speech* of God, as Josua Ralston in his contribution to this volume pointed it out. According to that interpretation the Qur'an is not a collection of revealed supernatural propositions but a call of God to God.

Truth, according to that understanding, is at first a predicate of Godself.¹ God *is* truth, that is, characterized by absolute truthfulness. In the Old Testament, we find that predication, for example in Ps 86:11, “Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your truthfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name,” Truth, secondly, refers to the faithful person who trusts in that promise. He/she participates in that truth so that it can be said that he/she lives *in* that truth. And, thirdly, truth is a predicate of the relation between God and the faithful person, which is characterized by trustworthiness.

Being faithful in the first instance does not mean believing in certain doctrines (*fides quae creditur*) but being steadfast in the relation to God (*fides qua creditur*). That does not mean to deny the importance of the cognitive content of faith. But that content is like a cinder of the fiery nucleus of the living self-communication of God and like a coagulation of the flow of living faith, responding to it. The symbols of Christian faith can be seen as condensed summaries of the reflection on existential truth which was disclosed to the first generations of Christians in their way of living in relation to Christ by following the gospel.

Existential

Truth, according to this understanding, is related primarily to the meaning and orientation of a person’s life based on a faithful relation to God. It refers to understanding and practicing one’s existence, is perceived in the mode of certainties (as opposed to knowledge), and is articulated in the mode of confessional language (as opposed to supra-natural fact assertions). It is not given as such and once for all time in an absolute form and content but is actualized always anew in a sentience of basic trust in the spiritual foundations of one’s life—trust in the relation to God as the ground of all being. In the first instance, it is an experience of being

1. Cf. the 51st name of Allah in Islam: al-Ḥaqq = the Truth.

called into that relation, which gives safety and asks for responsibility. Its roots lie in the deep dimensions of experiencing what gives life a firm ground, orientation, and hope. Truth is the “*aletheia*,” the unveiling/unconcealing/disclosing of that fundamental existential safety, which occurs in a permanent dialectic of concealing and unconcealing. „[D]er Glaube artikuliert nicht Tatsachen, sondern Erleben, das [...] den Erlebenden mit umfasst.“¹

One cannot *have* that certainty and take it as a divine privilege, but can only *be* in it. Existential truth is not possessable; that is, its source is not subject to human grasp and control. The mode of understanding it is by standing under it. Living in relation to God means living in a realm of truth. It appears as a kind of relational space in which the believer dwells. Existential truth is inhabited by those who live from that meaning-giving source. According to John 3:21, truth in that understanding needs to be *done*.

Its content is not cognitive knowledge of metaphysical facts but rather existential life-orienting wisdom as it is passed on in the Biblical testimonies and in the Christian tradition. But there may also be *loci theologici alieni*, foreign locations of God’s self-communication (Cano 1563; Körner 1994). As a source of meaning and of life-orienting, the truth of Christian faith is not a matter of rightness, correctness, or veracity but of being truthful and trustworthy and giving spiritual empowerment. It is not something theoretical, which is claimed to be true as opposed to be false, but something practical, which proves to be true by living according to it. As a consequence, it can neither be verified theoretically by the use of pure reason nor by empirical observation nor by looking for references in the Holy Scriptures, but only practically by the fruits it bears in one’s (and the community’s)

1. “Faith does not articulate facts but an experience which involves the experiencing person” (Fischer 2005, 191).

life. It refers to the Christian's self-understanding which frames all of his/her knowledge.

Truth of that kind is "soteriological" truth, because not only it proclaims but *exerts* a healing power in the basic relations of the human being—the relation to him-/herself, the relation to other humans, the relation to the natural and cultural environment (the "world"), and especially in the relation to the divine ground of one's own existence. It is not just a pure informative message but a performative speech-act, a gospel.

Personal

Truth, according to this understanding, cannot be detached from the person who is experiencing and expressing it—as opposed to *rational* truth-claims which claim to be *generally* valid. Personal truth is related to a person's perception of herself, the interpretation of her life, and the relations in which she lives. Its perception and realisation is shaped by her education, by the social and cultural context, and by religious traditions.

As Kant postulated that every act of thinking needed to be accompanied by the consciousness of the transcendental *cogito* (I think), every expression of faith also needs to be accompanied by the consciousness of the transcendental *credo* (I believe). Confessional language is language in the grammatical first-person singular or plural.

That does not mean that existential, personal, and confessional truth is only a *subjective* expression of sentiments and as such tends to be *irrational*. Against such a charge of relativism, it needs to be stated firstly that personal truth is not confined to an individual person. It wants to be shared; that is, it is intersubjective and embedded in a faith community. Secondly, it can, and tends to, become articulated in (confessional) statements, rationally reflected (*fides quaerens intellectum*), and communicated.

But in proceeding from articulating faithful experiences in confessional statements to formulating theological propositions, the nature of truth shifts; its attachment to the person (or the community) who gives testimony to it recedes. The language switches from the first person (“I/we believe”) to the third person (“it is the case that” or even “it must be firmly believed that”¹). The statement turns from a personal testimony to an assertion which claims general validity, and as such it might come into conflict with other truth-claims of that kind. That conflict can lead to a rejection or, in extreme cases, even the condemnation of contradicting claims and those who raise them.

That shift cannot be avoided completely when it comes to theological reasoning. All the more, it is important then to make theological assertions transparent for their existential dimension. Theological propositions are to be understood as rationalizations of confessional language, which express a soteriological meaning that affects the life-orientation of the believer. Only in the light of that meaning—and that means only in the hermeneutical circle of Christian faith—do those facts become existentially relevant.

Dynamic

Even if the truth itself—which is God’s self-determination to be in a salvific relation with creation—is beyond all history, all its manifestations (or revelations) and, all the more, all its perceptions are historical. The truth of Christian faith according to that understanding occurs in history as the word of God proclaimed by prophetic voices, incarnated in Jesus, and disclosed by the Holy Spirit. Such occurrences need to be received in order to become life-orienting truths.

1. That formulation appears seven times in the declaration “Dominus Iesus. On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,” issued by the “Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith” on August 6, 2000 (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html) (accessed 02/06/2018).

“Revelation” comprises not only the impartation of the divine truth but also the participation in it. It leads to gaining a new self-understanding, “seeing” patterns of meaning, and being gifted with new trust and hope.

Existential truth as basic trust in the foundations of life is not given once and for all times, but accompanies the process of life, is involved in it, and shapes the way of life. The perception of it can change, get stronger and weaker. It is not static but dynamic and fluid. Karl Jaspers stated: „Wahrheit ist in der Zeit immer auf dem Wege, immer noch in Bewegung und wird selbst in ihren wunderbarsten Kristallisationen nicht endgültig“.¹

The same applies to the truth of faith as being shared in the community of the faithful (be it a single community at a certain place and time or the worldwide community of Christians throughout history): it develops with the way that community lives and understands the faith in Christ. It is part of their language-flow (“*Sprachstrom*”) and thus involved in history.

In John 14:6, where Christ is confessed to be the way, the truth, and the life, the existential and the dynamic dimensions of the truth of Christian faith are expressed. It is the truth of Christ as the source of the Christian way of life. But just *that* verse of the New Testament, especially the second half of it (“no one comes to the Father except through me”), was and is often quoted in order to justify an apologetic or even polemic attitude toward other faiths. That leads me to the last part of this paper, in which I want to investigate the relevance of that understanding of truth for a theology of religion.

Existential Truth and Theology of Religion

The existential understanding of truth leads to distinguishing between God’s truth and one’s own perception of it. *God’s* truth exceeds all

1. “Truth is always on the way in time, always in movement, and never becomes final, not even in its most wonderful crystallisations” (Jaspers 1947, 961) (my translation).

perceptions and realisations of it. There might be other perceptions and realisations. From that distinction, it follows that Christians ought to be open to the testimonies of adherents of other religions. In *Dialogue and Proclamation*, it reads, “While keeping their identity intact, Christians must be prepared to learn and to receive from and through others the positive values of their traditions. Through dialogue they may be moved to give up ingrained prejudices, to revise preconceived ideas, and even sometimes to allow the understanding of their faith to be purified” (§ 49).

Personal perceptions of truth can be exclusively valid for the persons and communities who refer to them without necessarily excluding adherents of other religions from the source of the truth. That source is the saving will of God, which, according to *Lumen Gentium*,¹ the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” §16, is universal. *Gaudium et spes*,² the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World,” states in §22 that in the hearts of all men of good will, God’s grace works in an unseen way.

Giving testimonies of one’s own perception of truth need not include judgements on the faith of others. Enunciating existential truths can be attended, on the one hand, by the firm conviction that they express truth of divine origin and, on the other, by the consciousness that they are only *expressions* of that truth and not the truth itself. That leaves space for acknowledging different perceptions and expressions and thus acknowledging a plurality of truths.

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1. Available at
<http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html> (accessed 02/06/2018).
 2. Available at
<www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html> (accessed 02/06/2018).

In a 2015 published declaration on “Christian faith and religious plurality in protestant perspective,”¹ the Protestant Church of Germany states, “Because the Christian faith is an individual certainty, it cannot be held in a responsible way, without granting the right to others to hold their own religious convictions and thus without acknowledging and strengthening the right of religious pluralism.”² In a similar way, Ingolf Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger state: „Man ‚hat‘ nicht, was einen wahr macht, und man sollte anderen nicht bestreiten, dass das auch für sie gilt“ (2004, 27).³

If it is taken into account that truths of faith are relational, existential, personal, and dynamic, they cannot claim to be absolute, that is, detached from the way the believers understand and practice their existential relations, especially their relation to God. They are not detached from the believer’s mode of perceiving and realizing that truth and thus from the cultural and religious frames, which shape their views of themselves, the world, and God.

Accepting that God’s truth is “greater” than every religious perception of it creates a kind of theological humility and curiosity in the encounter with the adherents of other religions. It does not at all relativize the truth of the Christian faith but rather takes it for granted that Christ, who, according to Christian faith, is the true self-revelation of God, will give his mandate back to God at the end of time (I Cor. 15:28). Only then God’s complete and full truth will be manifest. The New Testament preserves the tension between the “already,” what God has done in Jesus Christ, and the “not yet,” the final completion, which

1. *Christlicher Glaube und religiöse Vielfalt in evangelischer Perspektive. Ein Grundlagentext des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)*, available at <https://www.ekd.de/ekd_de/ds_doc/christlicher_glaube.pdf> (accessed 02/06/2018).

2. The English translation is mine.

3. “One does not ‘have’ what makes oneself true and one should not deny that this applies also to others” (my translation).

is yet to come. Of course, this “full” truth will be no other truth than the one which was revealed in Jesus Christ—the truth of the universal salvific will of God. But it will come to its consummation and full realisation only then. That “eschatological reservation” does not allow for any form of religious fundamentalism which claims to possess the final truth to its full extent already now.

As long as that consummation is not reached, there will be conflicting truth-claims within and between the religions. But the (confessional) conflicts are of a different kind, depending on whether a cognitive-propositional or an existential truth-claim is raised. Conflicting fact-assertions cannot be true at the same time in the same respect, while different existential expressions of truth can coexist and become related to each other in a dialogical way.

As stated before, there are fact assertions embedded in the existential truths of the religious traditions. For Christianity, there is no doubt that Jesus was crucified. The Qur’an, however, in Q 4:157f. rejects that. Even if there is a scholarly debate on how to interpret that verse, the vast majority of Muslims would contradict the Christian understanding of the historicity and the salvific meaning of the crucifixion. There is a clash of truth-claims on the level of fact-assertions and, even more, on the level of theological meaning, for example, in regard to salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not only are those truth-claims *not* accepted by other religious traditions, in some cases, they are even explicitly and sometimes polemically rejected. On the level of the belief-systems, those clashes are hard to resolve. But if those systems are seen not primarily as ideologies but as life-orientations—that is, less in regard of their cognitive content and rather in regard of their existential function—then the conflict is mitigated. The different truth-claims can become a subject of mutual understanding.

In Rom 14:5, Paul wrote: “Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind.” Of course, Paul did not tend to be a postmodern thinker who pleads for a religious relativism. For him, the proclamation of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection was the only means of salvation for all humanity—Jews and gentiles. But he considered that there are different ways of participating in that truth. That can be seen as a justification for demanding freedom of religion on the foundation of Christian faith. But the freedom *within* Christian faith cannot be limited to Christian faith. By an inherent necessity, it tends to get extended beyond. That does not lead to accepting every religious truth-claim. Paul asked for a discernment of spirits, that is, for a theological critique of religion.

But how are we to interpret the clearly exclusivist statements on the salvific relevance of Jesus Christ which can be found in the New Testament, like in John 14:6? Isn’t that an assertion which does not allow for any openness toward other religious truth-claims? If Jesus Christ is *the* way to God and if there is no other way, aren’t then all adherents of other religions off the right track and deprived of all hope to gain salvation? (See Bernhardt 2007, 157-68)

A hermeneutical reflection is required to understand this verse. It makes a big difference whether one understands it as a metaphysical, and thus general statement on the truth of the Christian faith, or as an existential confession of that truth by a faithful follower of Jesus, for whom *this* is the only way to God. As pointed out above, confessional language is language in the first person, while metaphysical language is language in the third person. Of course, one cannot separate the two from each other—if Jesus Christ is not the way to God, it would make no sense to follow him and express that discipleship in confessional statements—but it is important to understand that metaphysical statements are rooted in confessions of faith. All the traditional symbols of the church were intended and used as doxologies.

They are communal testimonies of faith, not decrees of supra-natural knowledge.

According to such an understanding, John 14:6 must not be conceived as a conditional clause which imposes a proviso for getting access to salvific community with God and by that excludes others who are not be able or willing to fulfil that proviso, but as a an expression of a personal experience: the follower of Jesus experienced Jesus Christ as the personification of the Torah, who led him unconditionally to communion with God. Based on that understanding, the statement expresses the salvific sufficiency of the experienced relation to God constituted by the mediation of Jesus, the Christ.

Interpreting John 14:6 not as an authentic word of the historic Jesus but as a confession of faith in Christ by a Christian of the community of John (as the majority of New Testament scholars suggest), the “claim” of exclusiveness becomes understandable as a proclamation of faith which invites others to participate in that relation to God. The verse does not maintain the possession of truth against others who lack it and thus are not included in God’s saving will. It is not a manifestation of religious arrogance but a “missionary” statement of a believer who felt possessed by that relational truth and could not keep it private.

Conclusion

The understanding of truth in the context of Christian faith has nothing to do with religious imperialism or with a sense of superiority which denies the truth of other religious convictions. It expresses the truthfulness of God’s promise as it is expressed in the gospel, for example in Rom 8:38, where Paul assured that nothing can “separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It is that certainty which can constitute an open attitude towards other ways of being Christians and towards other ways of believing in God.

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