

“UNITY OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY” AND “UNIVERSAL  
SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS”: LEADING CONCEPTS OR MERE HORIZONS  
ON THE WAY TOWARDS A WORLD THEOLOGY?

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It is a familiar fact that it is difficult for revolutionary “worldviews” to gain recognition and acceptance. The most successful way to overcome this problem was termed by Hegel *Aufhebung*. In the ideal case envisaged by Hegel, *Aufhebung* says that the new “worldview,” or the theory which articulates that worldview, reconstructs within itself elements of the old perspective on the world, together with a critique of that perspective. However, the preservation of old worldviews in new theories can also take a more straightforward form. Only rarely do new worldviews emerge thoroughly developed. As a rule they continue to employ numerous leading concepts which belong to the older tradition. Only after a relatively long period of time are the old leading concepts replaced or reformulated—or, on the other hand, is the new theory withdrawn. We are well acquainted with such a course of events. But that does not prevent us from living *de facto* with theoretical orientations towards the world which represent mixed forms of old and new theories. We simultaneously employ new perspectives and old observations, new forms of thought and old theses. We think that we can enjoy the new cake and still eat the old one. This situation usually leads us to form an unrealistic picture of the power of the newer worldview. We fail to recognize the fact that new worldviews, as a rule, substantially overextend their credit. The dangers of granting too much credit to these new conceptions are seldom seen clearly and are often underestimated.

Admittedly, the tensions between old and new initiatives are sometimes fruitful; recognition of these tensions can propel further developments. But this possibility can mislead us into underestimating the radical effects and the relative deficiencies of the new worldview. By continuing to employ a whole ensemble of evidence from the old worldview, we fail to see the ways in which the new worldview is creeping in. This blocks us off from a clear-headed estimate of the newness of the new worldview, and of its capacity for achievement.

This dynamic corresponds thoroughly to our self-understanding of the “new,” “revolutionary” worldview which Wilfred Cantwell Smith presents in his book *Towards a World Theology*.<sup>1</sup> Smith regards history and historically mediated reality as polycontextual and multiperspectival, an ever-changing multiformity, a multifarious variety of interconnections, interactions, interrelations, and interpenetrations of events.<sup>2</sup> Intellectual commerce with this basic vision requires very demanding theories. Such theories must be relativistic in their basic structure, yet they must at the same time describe and regulate the transformation of apparent indeterminacy into determinateness.

It is no exaggeration to say that the most important contributions to this new, relativistic type of theory in our century have come out of Harvard. One thinks above all of A. N. Whitehead’s relativistic cosmology, and in fact his terminology appears occasionally in *Towards a World Theology*.<sup>3</sup> Significant contributions to this “new generation of theories” have also come from Talcott Parsons<sup>4</sup> and Nelson Goodman.<sup>5</sup> Today—and in this estimation I agree completely with Smith—all contributions of substance to the human sciences must place themselves in a conscious relation to this polycontextual and multiperspectival worldview. Naively monocentric theories—that is, theories which permit only *one* system of reference—as well as all forms of theories of a two-storied or stratified world, no matter how sophisticated their internal structures might be, no longer correspond to our imputations of reality.<sup>6</sup>

This article concentrates on two conceptions which might be regarded as “leading concepts” on the new path described in *Towards a World Theology*: the “Unity of Religious History” and “Universal Self-Consciousness.” I will reflect upon the transformation these leading concepts undergo in the framework of the new theories.

<sup>1</sup>Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) esp. 49–50, 54.

<sup>2</sup>These expressions appear particularly in the first part of the book.

<sup>3</sup>This holds true not only for the notion of “process” and its more detailed characterization, but also for interest in orders which are transindividual and yet concretely lived, for the imputation of a reality structured in pluralistic ways, for the usage of the words “nexus” and “event,” and for the criticism of “bifurcation.” This, however, does not mean that Smith takes over Whitehead’s theory.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Talcott Parsons, “Field Theory and System Theory: With Special Reference to the Relations between Psychobiological and Social Systems,” in Daniel Offer and Daniel X. Freedman, eds., *Modern Psychiatry and Clinical Research: Essays in Honor of Roy R. Grinker, Sr.* (New York: Basic Books, 1972) 3–16. See also the texts mentioned on p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>See Nelson Goodman, *The Structure of Appearance* (3d ed.; Dordrecht/Boston: Reidel, 1977); idem, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Michael Welker, “Hegel and Whitehead: Why Develop a Universal Theory?” in G. R. Lucas, ed., *Hegel and Whitehead: Contemporary Perspectives on Systematic Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986) 121ff.

I will describe, in two lines of thought, several difficulties involved in trying to connect these leading concepts with the theory based on the new worldview. I then ask the question of how the conceptions of "Unity of Religious History" and "Universal Self-Consciousness" can be prevented from becoming indeterminate representations which serve as mere horizons, as mere boundary visions. Unlike more conventional conceptions like "history" and "self-consciousness," such conceptions have no power to direct theoretical development. I will then ask whether the new conceptions achieve anything more than *ciphering* vanishing points of integration in a process which remains beyond conceptual grasp.

In the third section I will consider several impulses of the book *Towards a World Theology*, and ask whether the new worldview allows more specific processes of attunement between religious symbol systems than these ciphers suggest.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I will give a short general description of these processes of attunement, which make differentiated cooperation—instead of a fusion or an abstract opposition—of theologies and the comparative study of religion feasible and indispensable.

#### THE "UNITY OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY" AND THE PROBLEM OF DETERMINING THAT UNITY

Throughout *Towards a World Theology*, Smith speaks of "whole history,"<sup>8</sup> and above all of the "unity of religious history" (3, 6, 18, and passim). Of course, he is not thinking of a simple continuum or a determinate, unilinear arrangement of facts or events. His basic thought is of a "coherence" of events, "a web of human relationships" (42), whose connection could in principle be perceived or "read" in various perspectives. At first glance it seems possible to attribute "unity" and "wholeness" to such a nexus, like we attribute "unity" and "wholeness" to a network of roads, or a labyrinth. But this view becomes problematic in light of the polycontextual and multiperspectival condition of our theories. Does history in general and religious history in particular exhibit only *one* optimal course? Or can we attribute to history only a determinate or determinable number of centerings of nexus of events, so that we can speak of "unity" and "totality" with regard to a nexus of events which is in some sense *one* nexus? The "old worldview" answered this question in the affirmative. The impressiveness of the timeline and the imputation of an

<sup>7</sup>The function of ciphers is to cover that which cannot be determined in order to proceed as if the undetermined were clear. Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977) 33–34, 84–85.

<sup>8</sup>On the "total history of the world," "the world history of the whole," etc., see Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 17, 19, 37, etc. The page numbers cited in parentheses in this article refer to this book.

ultimate invariance of historical facts cooperated in establishing the foundation of this belief in the "unity of history."

In many of his statements about "historical facts," Smith seems to attach himself to this belief: "I take historical facts seriously: we must accept them, in all their stubbornness . . . and their uncancellable truth. Historical facts may not fit into our conceptual patterns; but they remain facts, thus to be accepted and revered" (20). On the basis of this presupposition, which for the "old worldview" went without question, one can indeed speak of an "empirical awareness" of these facts (18) and of an "empirical understanding of history" (55). Moreover, on this basis a process of maximizable comprehension of the coherence and unity of history can be envisaged—a process in which increasingly more facts become revealed in their uncancellable truth and with their interconnections (18, 21, and often). The operative conception here is of a history which stands fast in its elements—a history which, while advancing knowledge of the connections of its elements, discloses itself more and more completely to the unobstructed knowledge of its truth. This conception of history is so familiar to us that we are inclined to call it a "natural view." Smith strengthens the plausibility of this conception of history by giving examples which seem to support it, as well as the idea of the unity of religious history. Although his examples are few and, as he says, peripheral (15), they are nevertheless impressive. I will examine the most impressive and most common of these, the "Tolstoy example."

Referring to research by David Marshall Lang,<sup>9</sup> Smith examines Tolstoy's shift from the worldly life to the spiritual, along with the narrative material which motivated this shift. He shows that the motivation for Tolstoy's shift can be traced back to a tradition found in countless cultural and historical contexts. Smith suggests that the medieval Christian consciousness "in no negligible part" was formed by a story whose central theme was "the renunciation of worldly power and wealth by a young prince." This prince leaves "the world of pomp and pelf and worldly power to seek instead moral and spiritual truth" (8). Smith then notes that this medieval story, which underlies the Tolstoy story and which appears in many languages, itself has a Greek version underlying it; and the Greek version, a Georgian; the Georgian, an Arabian; the Arabian, a Manichaean; the Manichaean, a Buddhist; and so on. But just as this historical trace can be followed back from Tolstoy, so can it be extended beyond his lifetime. Gandhi and Martin Luther King are two possible heirs of this legacy.

<sup>9</sup>David Marshall Lang, *The Wisdom of Balahvar: A Christian Legend of the Buddha* (London: Allen & Unwin; New York: Macmillan, 1957); idem, *The Balavariani: A Tale from the Christian East Translated from the Old Georgian* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

Within the boundaries of the new polycontextual and multiperspectival worldview, the Tolstoy example remains an interestingly arranged nexus of discoveries. But Smith cannot be permitted to draw a logical inference from this nexus to one unity of religious history, to an increasingly disclosed truth, and to a sequence of historical facts subject to empirical perception.

From the perspective of the “new worldview,” what we have here is an abstract and ambiguous nexus of determinate narrative material: a standardized change of individual lifestyle, along with didactic and power interests which are religious as well as political. As historical fact this nexus is multivalent.

Consider only a few of the numerous questions which urge themselves upon us in the new framework:

1) What would argue, in principle, against reading the Tolstoy story from a non-religious perspective as a politically and morally informative report of the voluntary breaking off of the career of a well-to-do or powerful person? If this were the case, one would then have to recognize that this story, precisely because in itself it is not specifically religious, is open for numerous, even heterogeneous religious variations. In any case, to use the story as a central proof for the unity of religious history would appear under these conditions to be highly problematic.

2) To the extent that one is interested in “empirical” facts, what would speak against differentiating the traditional material into : (a) primarily biographical stories, which are psychologically and morally informative and which follow a comparable structure of types; and (b) stories which are primarily concerned with employing this structure of types in the battlefield between the religious and the political system. If one were seriously to make room for such questions, the possibility of clearly disentangling “religious history” from other historical contexts would be called into question.<sup>10</sup>

3) Finally, what would argue against fine-tuning observations, for example, in the direction of specifically *Christian* images, to such an extent that other traces, such as those which bear the impression of the Judeo-Christian law of mercy, would be seen as alternative forms of integration? In that case other connections and selections would result. These combinations could be informed by a general religious interest, without reaching the breadth of perspective to which Smith aspires.

In posing these questions, I am doing only that: I am not yet choosing an option. I am also not maintaining that it is not possible and meaningful for both perspectives (indeed, for many more) to coexist. On the contrary, I think that in fact all these perspectives can be assumed alongside each other. Many (not all!)

<sup>10</sup>In order to support Smith’s thesis under these conditions one would have to maintain that the unity of religious history and a unity of “the whole history” converge.

events can be disclosed in several (not all!) perspectives and attitudes of abstraction. So far, so pluralistic and relativistic.

In this framework of the "new worldview," which to a large extent Smith employs as his fundamental point of departure, it becomes very difficult to speak of a "stubbornness of historical facts" and of their "empirical perception." Of course there are stubborn facts which can be termed "empirical": events which pin down an individual life, condition, and age of texts, buildings, movements in natural space which are testified to beyond the shadow of a doubt. However, these are not yet "historical" facts in the strict sense. In no case are they "historical" facts in the sense of the "new worldview." They lack the individually meaningful relation to other events. As Smith would say, they lack interconnectedness, interdependence, interferences, and interpenetrations. However, when we reach the level on which empirical facts can and do become historical facts, even the nexus of events which are most verified and, so to speak, most stable can, in principle, be read from other perspectives (which are also based on data), and with different results.

It is a question of the level of abstraction, supported by data, whether the Tolstoy example is amenable to a stronger generalization by type, or whether it is understood, for example, as an element of political and moral history. The story could remain open with regard to religious content, but remain indifferent to such content. It would thereby surmount interpretation in terms of the history of religion.

But the "new worldview" does not only relativize belief in the empiricity and stubbornness of historical facts. Within the new framework the assumption of the unity and totality of religious history also finds itself in need of justification. It is not the case that we need only to look more and more closely at an increasingly intricate mesh of historical facts in order to come nearer and nearer to the one religious history and its truth. The data of the Tolstoy story not only give occasion to an impressive vision, on Smith's high level of abstraction, of continuity and unity in the history of religion. But the same data can also give occasion to numerous other perspectives on religious history and history in general. Some of those perspectives partially intersect and are to some extent compatible with one another; others conflict with one another. These other perspectives may appear narrower, weaker, and more short-sighted to people like Smith who are interested in the nexus of associations of traditional religious material. Yet inasmuch as those perspectives take into account other facts and other nexus than those emphasized by Smith, it is difficult to avoid granting recognition to their claim upon unity and totality of history, as well as the disclosure of truth.

It seems impossible to reject this consequence of the "new worldview": that old visions of unity and totality are dissolved by means of a multiplicity of unities and totalities, which is relative to events and perspectives. These relative

unities and totalities cannot simply be integrated according to the old model, as parts of an overarching whole. Each and every specific disclosure of a relative unity and totality of this sort, as well as the mediation of these unities among each other, cannot be grasped in a universalizable model. In the “new worldview,” it remains undecided whether increasing knowledge furthers unity or difference, universal understanding or ultimate confusion. Only at the price of complete indeterminacy can this vision of reality accept an *ultimate* unity and totality of history.

Since this ultimate unity does not and cannot display any structure, its name is arbitrary. One can employ artificial words or names for that purpose, or resort to conventional concepts of totality: universal history, world, fullness of meaning, process, etc. Here we are dealing not with conceptions, which guide processes of knowledge, but rather with ciphers, which cover and conceal that which cannot be determined or thought out.

The observation that employing the conception of history as a conception of totality allows the talk of unity and totality of religious history to become a mere cipher could cause one to shrink back from the “new worldview.” *Towards a World Theology* stands in the way of such a withdrawal. It halts our retreat to conventional conceptions. Smith does this by making central a second leading conception which takes seriously the problematic situation which we have described—namely, the polycontextual and multiperspectival constitution of the historical—and reacts to the challenge posed by this problematic situation. This conception is that of “universal, corporate, critical self-consciousness.”

#### “UNIVERSAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS” AND THE PROBLEMS OF OBJECTIVITY AND CERTAINTY

The problem we are concerned with here is how divergent perspectives of the world or of events can be mediated, without one perspective, in the name of an overarching unity and truth, declaring other perspectives to be deficient, and forcing them to conformity. It is precisely to this problem that Smith’s second central conception of “universal, trans-cultural, corporate, critical self-consciousness” responds. This concept is introduced both as a “new principle of verification” and as the “goal” and “ideal” of specifically “humane” knowing (60). It describes a regulative principle for a form of interpersonal knowledge which transcends both the “subjective” and the external, “objectifying” aspects of reality. In the words of Smith: “The only knowledge that is accurate of the history of religion, and indeed of culture, and indeed of human history generally, is a knowledge that participates in the consciousness of those involved” (63).

At issue is not only the problem of how one’s own experiences can be mediated with those of others. Also at issue is the difficult problem of how one’s own and alien experiences can be mediated, given the fact that both are

imprinted and stabilized experiences. How can imprinted experiences that I have made of myself and of others be mediated with imprinted experiences another has made of himself and his experiences of us?

This problem appears chronically in interreligious communication or, in Smith's words, in mediations between different "religious processes." The problem also appears in communications in which confessional solidification of perspectives is supposed to be both preserved and overcome. Furthermore, the problem, as we saw, appears when one attempts, in light of the "new world view," to attune divergent historical perspectives. Indeed, in relativistic cosmologies such as Whitehead's this problem is a basic operation. On the level of individual anthropology, we confront the difficulty that no human being sees with exactly the eyes of another, that nobody lives the life of another. With further "convergence to simplicity," the initial thesis runs: "No two actual occasions can have exactly the same relative actual world."<sup>11</sup> Once one has become sensitive to this difference between one's own perspective and an alien view, one can ask how a mutual understanding can be reached which takes in the (stabilized) other's perspective and either participates in it or allows participation in one's own perspective. To speak in an abstract and simplified manner, the matter at issue is an attunement of internal and external perspectives.

At this point Smith employs terminology in a way I must call into question. At issue is the determination of "objective" and "objectivity." Objectivity of knowledge is described throughout as "external knowledge," "externalist approach," manipulating and conceiving from the outside (57ff., esp. 68, 69–70, and passim).

That seems to me to be an oversimplification, indeed a caricature of the meaning of "objectivity." If one concentrates on a simple subject-object-structure,<sup>12</sup> on the aspects of externality and manipulation in characterizing objectivity, the very important characteristics of reproducibility and connectability as well as the communicable determinacy of objective knowing are neglected. Above all, Smith does not make it clear that the internal perspective can be objective and objectifiable, and that the external perspective can be subjective to the point of being unattainable, erratic, and bizarre. It is here that I see a fundamental problem in *Towards a World Theology*. In interreligious dialogues we have to reckon with requirements for understanding which cannot simply be led back to the old subject-object model (cf. 69). The question is how to mediate between objectified—i.e., determinate, attuned, and reproducible—

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (corrected ed. by D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne; New York: Free Press, 1978) 210.

<sup>12</sup>Certainly, the contrasting of person-to-person contacts with person-object relations is very plausible. Concepts like I-Thou, I-it, subject-subject, and subject-object have had a history of great effect. However, these approaches are insufficient for the determination of objectivity.



internal perspectives and similarly objectified external perspectives, which nevertheless cannot be transformed into each other without further ado. That is, they remain mutually external. The fusion of "objectivity" and "external approach," which we find in Smith, hinders the clarification of the task lying before us.

On the other hand, I agree with Smith's criticism of the popular misconception that objective and concrete perspectives are identical. Moreover, his criticism of an ideology of a universal or even "perfect" objectivity is fully on target (69–70, 75–76, and *passim*). There is no objectivity which does not abstract and is not selective and reductionistic.

I retain the perception that both the approach from without and the approach from within can be subjective or objective. The task of understanding which Smith describes as "corporate, critical self-consciousness" cannot be abstractly determined against the effort for objectivity. No doubt the effort for objectivity does not do justice to life. In fact, in order to reach objectivity—that is, strict repeatability and reproducibility—we must relatively fix that which we are observing, or consider it only in terms of aspects which can be fixed.

However, historical knowing which unfolds with increasing differentiation cannot correspond to such objectivity. As *Towards a World Theology* repeatedly emphasizes, the process of objectification does not do justice, above all, to human beings in their living, developmental dynamic and freedom. Most importantly—and this is the decisive objection against mere objectivity—the objectifying process of observation immunizes itself, by being a process of observation, against the formative impulses which proceed from our fellow human beings and from the achievements of spirit.

But what is the alternative to the objective approach? Smith's answer is that we have to develop a form of understanding which makes possible the mutual appropriation of ways of perceiving the world.<sup>13</sup> He calls this "the new mode of humane knowledge . . . in terms of a disciplined corporate self-consciousness, critical, comprehensive, global" (78–79).

<sup>13</sup>This is obviously more easily demanded than clearly projected. Whoever occupies himself or herself with questions of communication techniques and of tact—not to mention the problems of penetrating their logic—experiences the difficulties of forming even mutual boundary perceptions between our own perspectives and those of others. But even in these boundary perceptions a non-objectifying, mutual taking over, and attuning of perspectives has not been reached. As soon as we leave the realms of concrete encounters and of communication which has become routine and familiar, we quickly find ourselves in an intellectual no-man's-land with regard to the planning of concrete communication. It is unforeseeable how others' ways of perceiving the world are supposed to become accessible to us without religious, philosophical, and popular-cultural objectifications, and much help from "la raison du coeur."

Smith is well aware of the fact that this passing over from the old I-centered self-consciousness to a new, universal, we-centered self-consciousness is not easily understood. "It may seem cavalier to assert that all knowledge of man by man is *ipso facto* self-consciousness. The assertion is true only in so far as all humankind is one. And it becomes operative (and salvific) in so far as that unity is seen, and felt; is willed" (57).

By "universal self-consciousness" Smith does not mean a conventional philosophical conception of self-consciousness. Neither does he mean the effort to have the unity of a self-certainty which cannot be circumvented and a capacity for self-relativization take effect in a moral pressure towards universal understanding and equalization. Only occasionally does Smith's argumentation seem to lie along this line (cf., e.g., 101–2, 103), thus joining itself to exemplary and influential projects of the philosophy of modernity.

Such projects started from the I-centered conception of self-consciousness as the principle of equality and objectification. Everybody can activate the knowledge of "I think" with regard to thoughts he or she has thought.<sup>14</sup> He or she thus thinks of himself or herself not only with regard to the thought or thoughts she or he definitely thought, but also "in relation to indefinitely many possible thoughts."<sup>15</sup> This does not mean that the self-consciousness believes it contains all the contents of all possible thoughts. Rather, the self-consciousness is the certainty that I can actualize the knowledge "I think" with regard to all thoughts I have thought and will think. This is why we ascribe to ourselves a particular familiarity with ourselves and a sense of security and confidence in our world.<sup>16</sup> It is because of this undeniable connection between self-confidence and (decomposable—not diffuse!) world-confidence that self-consciousness can be attributed to and expected of every thinking being: it is the principle of equality and objectification.

Precisely that which in the basically individualistic and formal point of departure of the theory of self-consciousness was the unquestioned foundation becomes a problem in Smith's "new" conception aimed at a "world theology." Neither the certainty which could not be circumvented nor the expectation of objectification and reproduction can be supposed as constitutive of the new, universal, corporate self-consciousness, which goes back to forms of life influenced by culture and religion. It remains unclear how "self-consciousness" is to direct the exchange between corporately lived forms of life whose

<sup>14</sup>Here I follow the theory of self-consciousness developed in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Dieter Henrich's systematic reformulation of its central argumentation. Cf. D. Henrich, *Selbstverhältnisse. Gedanken und Auslegungen zu den Grundlagen der klassischen deutschen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982) 178ff.

<sup>15</sup>Henrich, *Selbstverhältnisse*, 179.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 180–81.

elements are irrevocably formed in a definite way. Smith does not offer a theory of the spirit à la Hegel,<sup>17</sup> which in its constellation of problems would have to set out from this level.

In fact, the universal self-consciousness which Smith finally refers to as an “ideal” or a “goal” displays the same structure as the universal unity of history which we discussed in the first section: a ciphering of universal mutuality. This universal mutuality—a boundary vision of many of today’s projects in theology and philosophy—is devoid of a rule of process and a grounding certainty.

Thus Smith’s road to universal self-consciousness leads into a desert. Attempts to participate consciously in this self-consciousness are, in Qohelet’s terms, a “striving after wind.”

The attempt to take seriously and preserve the individuality of lived cultural and religious forms of life has failed. So has the attempt to transform integrative conceptions like “unity of history” and “self-consciousness” in order to clear the way to comprehensive mutuality within a new worldview. Such attempts are certainly worthy of all sympathy and all exertion. Yet solutions are hard to come by; promises and moral appeals centered on ciphers can hardly be considered a satisfactory orientation.

But what if Smith’s suggestions are seen not as a solution but as a description of a problem? What if one understands them as a challenge to conventional conceptions and forms of individual and social self-consciousness—a challenge aiming at the attunement of internal and external perspectives? This approach to Smith’s suggestions is taken in the following section, which considers a common advance in different kinds of work in theology and the comparative study of religion.

#### RELIGION AND REALISTIC SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: THE MEANING OF THE RECONSTRUCTION OF FORMED EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVES

Why is it conducive to our inquiry to confront the conventional conception of self-consciousness with the problem of the attunement of internal and external perspectives?

First of all, the “new” polycontextual and multiperspectival worldview sensitizes us to this problem. Moreover, the cultural situation of our day, repeatedly described in *Towards a World Theology* (3ff., 49ff., 81ff., and esp. part III), has not only led to a frantic acceleration of communication and an oversupply of communication stimulations and content; it has also called into question conventional ways of fixing and preserving identity, e.g., through “history” or “self-consciousness.”

<sup>17</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg’s most recent publications also aim in that direction; see *Anthropologie in theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983) esp. 472ff, 502ff.

We are incessantly confronted with the fact that our environment sees us in a multiplicity of perspectives which differ from our own ways of understanding and presenting ourselves. Our "self" thus meets us pluralized. It meets us in these external perspectives in a manner which is often so multifaceted and dissociated that we have great difficulty successfully continuing to employ old strategies of integration like historical-biographical serializing or unity of pure self-certainty. The difficulties are multiplied when these complex perspectives present themselves as objectified. This occurs in role and image conflicts in individuals, but above all in communication between social units.

Communication becomes extremely difficult between social units which are accustomed to explicit and stable self-definition, and which must treat such self-definitions as indispensable (e.g., churches). To the old, familiar problems of uniting self-definitions in the spheres of history, dogmatics, the institution, and popular piety are now added the difficulties of locating oneself in the contexts of other fixed, attuned, recognized perspectives, and of relating to this objectified self. Of course, even in a pluralistic and intensively communicative culture, one could theoretically continue to react to this constellation with accusations of heresy and other techniques for insulating oneself from the perspectives of others, however woeful, immoral, or unscientific that might be.<sup>18</sup> But in our present culture such a renunciation of an attunement of internal and external perspectives results in an unrealistic relation to oneself.

The problem with this development is that the increasingly illusory relation one has to oneself can easily remain hidden. One continues to employ the same canonized history, the same dogmatics, the same liturgy, the same buildings. So why does the relation others have to one change? One continues to be interested in the course of the world, continues to have one's ethos, one's norms, one's good intentions. So why do others see this differently? Why do they agree in perspectives on us which we cannot share? Why do they simply lose interest in continued communication with institutions which have been tried historically and are richly structured?

This process, which one can well understand from the perspective of the "new worldview," can be described as a deformation and shrinkage of one's perspective on the world. If a person or group of persons lives with an unrealistic relation to its own objectified self, it no longer understands the world. The attunement of its own, relative world to the worlds in which others live no longer succeeds, or it only succeeds so selectively that, out of necessity, one receives only one's own program.

<sup>18</sup>Moreover, in the face of divergent or even conflicting perspectives, there is a procedure which opposes those perspectives in order comfortably to privilege one's own position: "x sees me or my theory thus; y sees the opposite. Now I will say once more how it really is."

For churches, this process is strengthened through arrangements which earlier counted as magnificent achievements: stabilizing dogmatics, liturgies, centering on certain persons and places, etc. One can, of course, try to react to this situation with dissolution of structure, renunciation of self-definitions, ideologies of unbounded openness, and forms which sociologists term "organized chaos." One can theoretically transform all the leading conceptions of the tradition into ciphers, all nexus of thought into theses and aphorisms, and use up the tradition's credit for determinacy, as long as that credit lasts. This road leads to a destructuring and dissolution of religious symbol-systems. Whether new symbol-systems will be constructed at the same time, and whether the most integrative and plausible of them will win out, is something we do not know.

The way which offers itself as an alternative is more laborious, but leads less into vagueness. This way, just as maintained in *Towards a World Theology*, requires a sensitivity for the difference between internal and external perspectives. This way also claims that, under today's conditions of communication within the framework of the new, polycontextual, multiperspectival worldview, internal perspectives cannot be stabilized and maintained in lively effectiveness without external perspectives on oneself which are self-projected, but externally controlled. In order to know its own identity, a church, for example, must also project an outline of external perspectives on itself. In this respect theology should attempt to reach again the conceptional level of the biblical texts. From very subtle and very complex reflections on Israel in the perspective of foreign peoples to Paul's seeming relativism (1 Corinthians 9; Romans 14), biblical texts contain numerous forms of thought which are a challenge to any systematic approach.

A church, for example, cannot let an outside agent relieve it of the task of reconstructing the external perspective, assuming the church does not want simply to subjugate itself to an ensemble of already present impressions and opinions. The reconstruction of these external perspectives is thus a theological task, although practitioners of religious studies are in an excellent position to insist upon the fulfilling of this task. At the same time, this reconstruction of the external perspective runs the danger of being dominated by, and even absorbed in, the internal perspective. This results in wishful self-presentation and an unrealistic relation to oneself.

In order to avoid this, the reconstruction of the external perspective must be directed towards universal agreement. Here again it is helpful for theology to be embedded in the academic disciplines. However, this control is not enough. The reconstructed external perspective must also appear in court before judges who emerge within this perspective—in this case other bearers of religious

processes.<sup>19</sup> The laborious path of multiple processes of coming to an understanding regarding the adequacy of the external perspectives is unavoidable here. Do we see correctly how you see us? How do you see us in our perspective on you? In this laborious process of coming to an understanding—a process which alone is capable of uniting maintenance of structure and mediation of perspectives—the comparative study of religion is highly important. This discipline is in an excellent position to preselect the external perspectives on enduring, and thus highly objectified, relative perceptions. Above all, it can preselect the external perspectives on agreements between self-presentations and alien representations. The comparative study of religion can stand guard over the objectivity of the representation, of other expressions and of their perspectives on others (how we see others and how others see us). It cannot, however, stand in judgment of a particular religious tradition's own dogmatically defined expressions.<sup>20</sup> Through cooperation between theologies and the comparative study of religion unrealistic self-perceptions and self-presentations could be corrected, along with mutual distortions and simplified perceptions of the world. The goal of the process would be the formation and further development of realistic religious symbol-systems, adequate to the modern world. The goal would not be “unity,” but understanding—community despite and in the midst of attuned difference.

This process includes the best possible mutual understanding, but it does not spare the labor of differentiated understanding. It does not allow for reductionistic ways of seeing (e.g., that all religions ultimately want and say only the same and only one thing). Truth may unite, but it is not immediately simple. Of course, this is not to deny from the outset that all participants in this process are striving after the knowledge of the “God who is eternally rich” or the “fullness of the Godhead.” It is only to assert that every knowledge of God must prove itself in its unfolding, in its power to cultivate and to mediate knowledge of self and world.

<sup>19</sup>*Mutatis mutandis*, also secular conversation partners, bearers of political authority, mass media, etc.

<sup>20</sup>For the mediation between dogmatic structures and universal relativistic theories, see Michael Welker, “Barth’s Theology and Process Theology,” *Today* 43 (1986) 383ff.