

SUBJECTIVIST "FAITH" AS A RELIGIOUS TRAP

I. THE TOPIC OF FAITH

One of the main goals of the *Property and Possession Project* was to start a comparative exploration of symbols and rationalities of "having, gaining and loosing" in economic and non-economic (especially religious) symbol-systems.¹ On the basis of such comparative exploration, it was the leading expectation that the rhetorical and rational constitution and maintenance of economic, social and religious forms of communication and order could be studied and tested.² Interdependences could be discovered and checked, alternatives could be ventured.³ Connected with this was, of course, the hope to gain perspectives on a post-consumerist social order⁴, a post-talion rationality and to work toward a "cultural reimagination" of the basic configuration of late modern societies.⁵ The following contribution chooses the topic of *faith* respectively "having, gaining and loosing faith" for a couple of reasons.

First, since "faith" is to be seen as a spiritual "gift", its rationality of "having and losing" should offer some challenges to the rationalities and symbols that guide our dealing with physical gifts and objects of desire. This does not mean that I intend a dualistic approach, opposing, for example, the gift of faith and the gifts in economy. I rather intend a multi-systemic or multi-contextual approach, which is conscious of the fact that in late modernity we live in functionally differentiated societies which require the awareness, that a specific

1 Including, of course, transformations and distortions of "having, gaining and loosing", like greed, user mentalities and dangerous modes of yearning; cf. in this volume William Schweiker, *Reconsidering Greed*; Charles T. Mathewes, *On Using the World*; David M. Gunn, *Identity, Possession, and Myth on the Webb: Yearning for Jerusalem*.

2 Cf. in this volume Patrick D. Miller, *Property and Possession in Light of the Commandments*; Claudia Camp, *Possessing Wealth, Possessing Woman, Possessing Self: The Shame of Biblical Discourse*; Margaret A. Mitchell, *Silver Chamberpots and Other Goods Which Are Not Good: John Chrysostom's Discourse Against Wealth and Possessions*.

3 Cf. Christine Firer Hinzi, *What is Enough? Catholic Social Thought, Consumption, and Material Sufficiency*; Jean Bethke Elshtain, *The Body and Projects of Self Possession*; both in this volume.

4 Cf. esp. Christine Firer Hinzi's contribution.

5 Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *Economies of Grace*; in this volume.

multitude (not just vague "plurality") of normatively coded rationalities guides our individual and common lives, our moral options and our cultural sensitivities and imaginations. Despite the genius theoretical efforts of Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann and others, we do not yet have a satisfactory theory of pluralistic societies. But the awareness that monosystemic, dualistic and relativistic approaches are insufficient, that they can easily lead into distortive abstractions and that we have to take countermeasures in our theoretical and practical orientations, is already of great importance.

Second, the topic of faith challenges us to the awareness, that in dealing with the canonic traditions of the bible a multi-systemic or multi-contextual approach seems advisable. This does not mean, of course, that we should treat these traditions like late modern pluralistic societies. But on the other hand, we should also question notions about the homogeneity or a simple stratified order of ancient societies and cultures. Even many biblical texts reflect the awareness, that market, politics and religion follow different patterns, different morals and rationalities. These morals and rationalities can be brought into perspectives of conflict and incompatibility ("You can not serve God and Mammon!") On the other hand we notice, that one sphere can use the language, the symbols and some reasoning of the attacked "other" (Cf. only Jesus' parables on prudent and good housekeeping and his recommendation to watch the behaviour of the "children of the world.")

This leads to the guess, that not just different virtues and values (faith in religion--prudence in economics--love in the family etc.) but rather *different configurations and hierarchisations of values and virtues separate and relate these spheres, contexts and systems*. This also leads to the guess, that the different configurations and hierarchisations of values and virtues can change in the course of historical and cultural development, expressing changes in the relations between the social systems. This would explain why we see in some historical and cultural settings friendly and mutually supportive constellations between specific social spheres and systems (for example: religion and science; or religion and law), whereas in other settings, we see stronger divides, stronger oppositions, stronger alienations of the same systems.

Third, although it is highly debatable--at least for a theologian--that faith is just a virtue, the concentration on the topic of faith allows for an approach towards *a virtue-theory reading of*

pluralistic structures that Deirdre McClosky seems to suggest.⁶ The topic of faith, as a binding power for a set of virtues, might offer some help to decode and "read" the multihierarchical pluralism of virtues. Seeing faith as a virtue is certainly a possible outside-perspective in a non-theological anthropology. The interesting question would be how the transformation (or even deformation) of a set or of a hierarchy of virtues in one social sphere or system affects the others and their interplay.

Fourth, the problematic texture of faith, dominant in late modern societies, offers an interesting test case for an optimization and maximization-process that turned into its own collapse. A form that was meant to secure the inescapability and ubiquity of faith seems to lead to the systematic and systemic (self-)emptying, self-banalization and self-secularization (Wolfgang Huber) of faith and even to the loss of faith. If this is correct, the topic of faith could provide a model to deal with the extremely difficult limit-questions ("What is enough?").

Fifth, over against these efforts to relate faith to the formative processes of cultural development, many strands of modern theology focus on faith as a strictly subjective trust and certainty. They distance or even disconnect this trust and certainty from other virtues except a highly individualized and finally romanticized person-to-person love. The assumption is that only in such immediate, culturally unconditioned encounters faith reaches its existential depth and profundity. Faith becomes a transcendental form, accompanying "all experience", with the potential to enter any encounter with another human being. Thus faith seemed to be the key to many or even any religious doors. On the other hand, this observation also explains the banalization and exhaustion of this subjectivist type of faith. It conditions a permanent longing and yearning for God, for "the other" and for the identity of the self, offering a dialectical certainty, which continually frustrates and re-stimulates on both ends. It offers what Hegel called the "bad infinity" (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*) of a transcendental form, which connects the feeling of abstract freedom with the feeling of abstract dependence.⁷

It is important, to explain both, the great evolutionary success of this transcendental form and the distortions it brings about. It is difficult to judge, whether the dominant type of religiosity

6 Cf. her contribution *Avarice, Prudence, and the Bourgeois Virtues*.

7 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1952).

in ailing classic mainline-churches in western industrial societies should be understood as a loss of faith or not. On the one hand church leaders and academic theologians assure us that this type of faith is an evolutionary product that has met the challenges of modern culture and that it provided a high number of "anonymous Christians" (Karl Rahner), patient supporters of the church and a culture open to religion. On the other hand we keep hearing that our societies and cultures are suffering a great "spiritual hunger", that the language of faith became strange and sterile, that the majority is ashamed to speak about matters of faith and that fundamentalist reactions against this do not resonate with realistic experience.

Seeing that faith is a religious and cultural form shaped and reshaped in the course of history, we can certainly ask: What are the alternatives then? Obviously not a topical respecification of God (as "the inner other") and of the abstract self--if the underlying structure of infinite longing and yearning is kept.⁸ Emptiness and infinity--often seen as religiously important and attractive figures--rather seem to be the crucial problem. The alternative is to replace the empty controlling form, to replace emptiness and infinity by a textured pluralism (not just a plurality) of the life of faith.

SUBJECTIVIST FAITH AS A RELIGIOUS TRAP

A commonly accepted understanding of faith in current Western societies is that a believing individual is utterly certain of something "wholly other", of a "transcendent" power, instance, or vaguely conceived transcendent person, that, at the same time, however, is intimately close. The "Beyond", the "final point of reference of creaturely dependence," the "other side" of the "founding relation of our existence"⁹ is given in an utmost, although continuously challenged certainty, and this gained, challenged and regained certainty is called "faith." This conception of "faith" approximates and even collapses in

⁸ Cf. David Gunn's paper with respect to "the Land"; the respecification of the modern self with respect to the body and the publicized emotion in postmodern media-and-competitive-sports-culture would be another example. Cf. M. Welker, Is the Autonomous Person of European Modernity a Sustainable Model of Human Personhood? in: The Human Person in Science and Theology, ed. N.H. Gregersen, W.B. Drees, U. Görman, T&T Clark: Edinburgh 1999, 95-114; Person, EvTh 2000/1.

⁹ Gordon Kaufman uses the expression "God as ultimate point of reference" in almost all his writings. I take up the expression "founding relation of our existence" [Existenzbegründungsrelation] from Eilert Herms.

emphatic self-reference. Karl Barth rightly called it "indirect Cartesianism."¹⁰ This indirect Cartesianism can be grasped by the formula, "I feel somehow dependent - thus I am." And: "I feel somehow dependent - thus I believe."

Since this conception of "faith" approximates and even collapses in emphatic self-reference, religious communication and particularly Christian theology have strongly tried to differentiate this "faith" from all forms of self-reference. As much as the inner certainty named "faith" was treasured - as much were all forms of self-reference stigmatized and denounced as "sin." Before this background, attempts to distinguish between innocent, trivial, and healthy forms of self-reference on the one side, distortive, traumatic and even demonic forms of self-reference on the other seemed to be risky. A paradoxical and neuroticizing mentality accompanied this religious form, since it proved to be extremely difficult to distinguish this empty inner certainty of a "Wholly Other" from a very simple and basic form of "pure" human self-reference, which had come to terms with its inner structure: namely, **that all self-reference has to include some element of difference, if it wants to reach the level of experiencing "certainty"**.

The upside of this form of challenged and reaffirmed certainty, which can be understood both religiously and secularly, seemed to be that nobody could escape this type of "faith"--at least not in cultures and among mentalities for which the self-reference of the individual is central, that is in cultures that belong to the typically modern world society. Seen from the outside, this form called "faith" combines the experiences of immediacy and negation, it contains the elements of intimate self-awareness/self-reference and difference. Since this form can appear both as a religious form and as a form of pure dialectical self-reference, it can be interpreted in a variety of ways.¹¹

It was above all Sören Kierkegaard who again and again presented this form as "faith" and

10 Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1*, pp. 223, 224.

11 This form could be used to render more complex religious, moral and metaphysical positions accessible for common sense, reducing and trivializing them and stating that they all would finally offer nothing else than this dialectic of subjective immediacy and difference, for example

- religiously the "Gefühl der schlechthinigen Abhängigkeit" ("the feeling of the utmost dependence", Schleiermacher), or

- from the point of view of moral philosophy as the simultaneity of self-assurance and self-challenge in the encounter with the "You ought!" of the moral law (Kant), or

- metaphysically as the dialectical unity and tension of "essence and existence" (Tillich).

recommended it as a genuinely Christian attitude: "... exactly this is ... the formula for faith: by relating to itself and by wanting to be itself, the self founds itself transparently in the power which has it set", or: "Faith is: that the self, by being itself and wanting to be itself, transparently founds itself in God."¹² Since this form of "faith" has been coined and inculcated by the popular and semi-popular academic and general *public reception* of the writings of Kant, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Rothe, Troeltsch and other thinkers of the 19th and early 20th century, one could label it "neo-protestant faith" and regard it as a product primarily of the 19th century. But directly and indirectly it has also been represented and spread by the most diverse theological thinkers and styles of thought of the 20th century¹³ and has become a widely spread form of religiosity in the Western industrialized nations, particularly among educated persons. I therefore prefer the systematic term "subjectivist faith" for it. Most of the theological attempts to understand this type of "empty faith" and to propagate it agree in the endeavor to demonstrate that this innermost and utmost certainty is on one side a clearly anthropological phenomenon, whereas on the other it is seen as God-given, grace-sponsored and not a trivial event or even the result of an everyday perceptual enterprise.

This experience of immediacy and negation, this experience of a religious or quasi-religious certainty called "faith" seems to be extremely precious and powerful. For it seems to allow us to introduce religious communication at practically any point. Nobody can escape this

12 Sören Kierkegaard, *Die Krankheit zum Tode. Der Hohepriester - der Zöllner - die Sünderin, Gesammelte Werke 24./25. Abteilung*, Düsseldorf 1954, 47 und 81. Vgl. ders., *Furcht und Zittern [1843], Gesammelte Werke 4. Abteilung*, Düsseldorf 1956, 78: "Dem Glauben ist einerseits der Ausdruck für den höchsten Egoismus eigen (das Furchtbare, das er tut, um seiner selbst willen tun), andererseits der Ausdruck für die absoluteste Hingabe: Es um Gott willen tun." This Position is connected with an emphatic stress on the "Inwardness" (*Innerlichkeit*), more exactly: the pure inwardness of faith and a strong polemic against all objectivity of faith's insight and understanding: z.B. *Einübung im Christentum, Gesammelte Werke 26. Abteilung*, Düsseldorf/Köln 1955, 216: "... die erste Bedingung für das Christ Werden ist, daß man unbedingt nach innen gekehrt sei." Und: *Abschließende unwissenschaftliche Nachschrift zu den Philosophischen Brocken [1846]. Erster Teil, Gesammelte Werke 16. Abteilung*, Düsseldorf/Köln 1959, 215: "denn das objektive Wissen von der Wahrheit des Christentums oder von seinen Wahrheiten ist gerade Unwahrheit; ein Glaubensbekenntnis auswendig können ist Heidentum, weil das Christentum die Innerlichkeit ist". It is a consequence of this thinking that faith becomes self-referential in the end: "Der Glaube selbst ist gleichsam des Glaubens Gegenstand." *Erbauliche Reden 1834/44, Gesammelte Werke 7., 8., 9. Abteilung*, Düsseldorf/Köln 1956, 85.

13 A particularly clear version of it has been offered by Rudolf Bultmann, *Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?*, *GuV I*, Tübingen 1933, 26ff, 36: "Denn wenn es sich im Glauben um die Erfassung unserer Existenz handelt, und wenn unsere Existenz in Gott gegründet, d.h. außerhalb Gottes nicht vorhanden ist, so bedeutet die Erfassung unserer Existenz ja die Erfassung Gottes." Ders., *Das Problem der 'natürlichen Theologie'*, *GuV I*, aaO., 294ff, 297: "Das glaubende Existieren vollzieht sich in einem neuen Verstehen der Existenz". The most drastic formula is offered by a text of 1929, which became published in 1984: *Wahrheit und Gewißheit*, in: *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, hg. v. E. Jüngel u. K.W. Müller, Tübingen 1984, 183ff, 202: "... ich verstehe Gott, indem ich mich selbst neu verstehe".

experience of immediacy and negation. As soon as a person tries to thematize his or her "inner self", he or she runs into this quasi-religious certainty. What is the element of the "Other" whom I encounter when I try to reach the utmost depth of my inner self? Is that God? In a form that appeals to the modern mind, we seem to have at hand what Calvin called the "natural awareness", the "presentiment of the Divine".¹⁴ To be sure, it is a culturally tamed and domesticated natural certainty. Where Calvin saw a vague awe in the face of aesthetic powers, cosmic laws, and social orders, the modern religious variant has only a notion of the poor dialectic of the empty self-awareness.

Many forms of theology, of teaching and of proclamation in the classic main-line churches have treasured this form of abstract and empty "faith" very highly. They have done a lot to shield this empty certainty from the discovery of its religious arbitrariness and ambivalence. They have adopted the idealist assertion that this certainty was the "foundation" of self-consciousness and the key to all epistemological and moral worth and the true foundation of personality.¹⁵ They have clothed this poor form with all sorts of rhetorics of "wholeness." And they have tried to reinforce the differentiation between a self-reference given by the divine and a self-reference of purely anthropological origin. However, on the basis of the underlying theoretical construction it was impossible to rid these attempts at differentiation of a trait of the arbitrary. As the long debates on the reflection theory of the self-consciousness teach us, this basic dialectical relation admits only the arbitrary definition and predominance of the "subjective and active" and the "passive and objective" side. Both aspects co-emerge in this self-referential certainty.¹⁶ The often heated theological debates over the question what the true and right order of giving and receiving, of activity and passivity in this presumed relation of God and human being is and should be were like the fight over the question whether "the emperor's new clothes" were black or white.

This critical analysis of the inner texture of a typically modern form of religiosity should, however, not lead us to underestimate its power. For this form of "faith" enabled us to

14 See the beginning of J. Calvin's *Institutio*, M. Welker, *Creation and Reality: Theological and Biblical Perspectives*, Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1999, chapter 2., and the important differentiation between a natural awareness and a presentiment of the Divine and a "natural theology" by W. Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie* Bd. I, Göttingen 1988.

15 Cf. M. Welker, *Is the Autonomous Person...*

16 See Dieter Henrich, *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht*, Wissenschaft und Gegenwart 34, Frankfurt 1967; *ibid.*, *Selbstverhältnisse*, Reclam: Stuttgart 1982; M. Welker, *Der Vorgang Autonomie. Philosophische Beiträge zur Einsicht in theologischer Rezeption und Kritik*, Neukirchener: Neukirchen 1975.

comfortably fuse religious and secular mentalities. It allows us for instance to proceed in no time from religious to moral communication and vice versa. Above all, it is an excellent background-focus for a consumerist culture with its effort to trigger the greed-fulfilment mechanism as effectively and perfectly as possible: already - but not yet; not yet - but already; intimacy with myself, which, however, changes into the encounter with the "Other"; the utmost certainty and yet at the same time the dialectical difference ... Furthermore, this type of faith allows for a religious coding of universalist mentalities. And it recursively seems to bless religious mentalities with a universalist aura. It continuously signals the message: "In a latent way, no reasonable person can be anything but religious!"

Like Calvin, who emphasized the power of the "natural awareness" of the Divine--despite its vagueness, its ambiguity and its ambivalence--we should acknowledge the power of the subjectivist form of "faith". But even if we take this religious form and its so to speak catalytic potentials seriously, we must at the same time, for reasons of clear-headedness and honesty, make clear that it systematically prevents and discourages a content-laden and communicative piety, that it has actually driven vast parts of the churches into a religious speechlessness and inability to communicate.

SUBJECTIVIST FAITH AS A LOSS OF FAITH?

Despite the difficulties described above to keep a religious and a non-religious form apart in subjectivist faith, despite its notorious emptiness and despite its almost arbitrary availability this "faith" will still easily find its defenders. And not only in popular culture. As a universally disposable phenomenon subjectivist faith seems to be an excellent antidote in religion and church against all kinds of dominance and formation of hierarchies. This, among other things, was extremely important to Schleiermacher.¹⁷ The power and manifold capability to function catalytically that were already granted to this "faith" seemed a recommendation with many. And admirers of modern culture may even praise it as a form which has gotten rid of historical and cultural ballast and has finally centered religiosity on "the essential." The critics

17 See the warning against a "Hierarchie der intellektuellen Bildung, ein(em) Priestertum der Spekulation ..., welches ich meines Teils nicht allzu protestantisch finden kann", in: Schleiermacher, *Über meine Glaubenslehre. Zwei Sendschreiben an Herrn Dr. Lücke*, in KGA I/10, Berlin and New York 1990, 307-394; quotation: Schleiermacher-Auswahl, Siebenstern München und Hamburg 1968, 128.

of this form possibly appear as traditionalists, religious "Bildungsbürger" and elitists or even as theological cold warriors who want to deny successful modern achievements their due recognition.

Thus it is not enough, for instance, to set Luther's or Paul's understanding of faith in opposition to the modern emptied understanding of faith and observe that in these cases the subjective faith relation to God is always connected to objective faith, included in it, borne and nurtured by it. In these and other theological classics we surely find the subjective relation to God always linked with a connection of conviction which has passed through certainties examined in manifold ways and through manifold questions for truth. Paul can write to the different congregations that "their faith is known in all the world," that he rejoices in this faith, that he wants to learn more about it; he can speak of the "growth" in faith or of the mutual enrichment and strengthening of faith. Paul also sees a second (or rather ontologically first) level of objectivity by speaking of the faith that has "come with Christ" or as a "gift of the Spirit".¹⁸ But why is it that such observations do not simply support traditionalist or biblicist preferences? Why do these observations make it necessary to discuss profound objections against the subjectivist faith and its usual alternatives?

Whoever has become sensitive to this field of problems cannot but perceive that a complex religious syndrom of suffering goes along with subjectivist faith. This syndrom of suffering demands a thorough self-examination and self-criticism of modern theology and piety. Not traditionalist preferences, but the perception of a complex set of factors from which the classical main-line churches in the Western industrial nations, paralyzed and traumatized, obviously suffer at the end of the twentieth century necessitate the examination and correction of a powerful basic form of modern religiosity.

18 In the first chapter of Romans, Paul clearly describes a complex spiritual exchange as "faith": "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, *because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world...* For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you--or rather so that we *may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine*" (Rom. 1:8,11-12). He also shares with the Thessalonians, at the beginning of the first of his letters that have been preserved: "In every place your faith in God has become known" (1 Thess. 1:8). He tells them that he sent Timothy as a messenger to "strengthen ... you for the sake of your faith" and "to find out about your faith." Finally, he tells them that he rejoices over "the good news of your faith" (1 Thess. 3:2-6, cf. 7ff.).

In Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and Hebrews as well we find formulations that make thankful reference to the fact that the faith of a community is publicly known (cf. Col. 1:4, Eph. 1:15, 2 Thess. 1:3, Heb. 13:1). In Philemon and 2 Timothy the same thing occurs with regard to the faith of individuals that has "become known" (cf. Philem. 1:5, 2 Tim. 1:5).

At least five factors must be named which, mutually strengthening each other, make subjectivist faith a power that not only blocks up faith but seems to destroy it systematically.

First, subjectivist faith comes in the form of a **transcendental principle**. It does not come--as faith should do--as a form that directly animates or enlivens the communication of faith. It is individuizing and stale, a fact which is hidden by its universal arbitrary availability.

Second, subjectivist faith comes as a necessarily **empty** religious form. It does not come--as faith should do--as a disclosing form which gains and promotes the knowledge of God and, in its light, stimulates content-laden knowledge of self and world possible.

Third, subjectivist faith comes as a--both challenged and restored--unconditional and utmost **certainty**. It is a self-sufficient religious form. Although this "faith" can and has to be activated again and again, it does not--as faith should do--offer a regulative to pass or advance from mere certainty to the serious individual and communal search for truth.

Forth, subjectivist faith comes as a paradoxical, self-inhibiting, even **neuroticizing** form in its combination of immediacy and negation. It does not promote--as faith should do--joy, doxology and the ennoblement of those who are seized by faith and spread it.

And fifth, subjectivist faith is of an **escapist** character. It conditions the withdrawal from expressive, festive, communicative, progressive forms of religious life or even counteracts them--as faith need not and should not do.

But these criticisms are not yet sufficient. It can be countered by the statement that faith may be very well grasped as an empty principle, but that this principle is open to infinitely many developments and shapings and that exactly this fact is its power and its strength of conviction. Thinkers theoretically most versed have summed this up in the formula: Faith is a **communication medium**.

FAITH AS A COMMUNICATION MEDIUM: A SOLUTION, OR MERELY A CONTINUATION AND POTENTIATION OF THE PROBLEM?

Faith does not simply come as an individual erratic certainty, but in an abundance of forms of religious dialectic certainty, forms that are stronger or weaker, more fleeting or steadier, as described above. Since these forms admit of communication and the knowledge of their likeness and relatedness, faith comes as a netted ensemble of such dialectic certainties. Thus this principle of religious certainty functions **as a communication medium**. Human beings can again and again join this medium, whether they themselves are religious or whether they come from insecurity, from attitudes and surroundings that are distant to faith, even without faith or hostile to faith.

In her important contribution "Sünde: Ein Definitionsversuch"¹⁹ Sigrid Brandt has shown how faith (as well as love and hope) can be understood as a "communication medium." On the one hand, Brandt employs Pauline Theology, on the other, insights of the sociologists Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. Following Luhmann she writes that communication--even and especially communication of faith--"does not simply (designate) a communicative action that transfers information. Rather, communication is an act in which three components, namely information, communication and understanding, are at the same time differentiated and connected," in order to make the connection and flux of further communication possible.²⁰ Following Parsons, Luhmann called "communication media" those forms which transfer a "symbolically generalized code of selection" to secure the "transferrability of achievements of selection over more or less long chains. Truth, love, power, money are prominent, evolutionarily successful examples of this." Faith, too, can be regarded as such a code of selection which activates a "symbolically generalized communication medium."

In that the code of selection "faith" is co-transferred in communications and information, it is guaranteed that the communications are "religiously" understood and religiously continued. The communication medium "faith" secures that certain human expressions are understood as expressions from piety and about piety, and not only as historical information or expressions which signal psychosomatic problems and cause worry. Completing Luhmann's thoughts,

19 Sigrid Brandt, Sünde. Ein Definitionsversuch, in: Sigrid Brandt, Marjorie Suchocki, Michael Welker, *Sünde. Ein unverständlich gewordenes Thema*, Neukirchener Verlag: Neukirchen 1997, 13-34.

20 Brandt, 22; see also: N. Luhmann, *Vertrauen. Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität*, 3. Aufl., F. Enke: Stuttgart 1989, 50ff, 51; *ibid.*, *Ökologische Kommunikation. Kann die moderne Gesellschaft sich auf ökologische Gefährdungen einstellen?*, 3. Aufl. Westdeutscher Verlag: Opladen 1990, 62ff und 267.

Sigrid Brandt shows that a communication medium like faith advances not only the general tone and frame for specific (in this case: religious) communication, but also makes possible very individual, typified shapings without destroying the religious security of communication. Communication media allow us to switch between the generalizing and the specifying tendencies and to give greater weight sometimes to the one tendency, sometimes to the other. Brandt is right when she states: "**Faith, hope and love** mostly do not symbolize their general meaning in plain language. They rather look for vivid forms of communication, form that concern human beings in their entirety and in their connections of life. They are **nocto-psycho-somatic symbolizing** media. Their forms of communication depend upon the creativity and originality of the person who communicates the message as well as upon the social forms of communication the semantics of their time and their cultural space."²¹

But what in fact does subjectivist faith achieve as a communication medium? Which signals of connection and continuation does it send and affirm as "religious"? In which way does it actually, as a code of selection and as a communication medium, counteract the above-mentioned syndrom of problems of subjectivist faith? The answer to this question is extremely disillusioning. It is true that subjectivist faith does in fact not only function as a form of individual religious experience, but also as a communication medium. But as such it only heightens the loss of faith because with the above-mentioned figure of "the inner relation to a wholly other which is intimately close" (cf. part II) it ultimately only passes off and communicates the form "perplexity (*Betroffenheit*)/sensitive susceptibility" as a comprehensive religious form.

This, however, initiates a sweeping process of self-secularization²² of religiosity and piety, since "perplexity/sensitive susceptibility" is by no means only stimulated in the religious sphere, but also in family life, in moral communication, in contact with the arts, and above all in the communication of the mass media, and here in great abundance. To be sure, the diverse areas can mutually strengthen each other. This observation is confirmed by the hardly broken interest in religious communication especially in situations of "passage" in the family, by the frequent close relationship of religion and morals, but also by the notorious love-and-hate-

21 Brandt, 24.

22 I owe this expression to Wolfgang Huber.

relation and the tension between religion and the media.²³ On this background the decay of religious knowledge and the banalization of religious communication in the modern industrialized nations become understandable. These developments were only temporarily interrupted and turned back in situations of national crisis, such as post-war situations.

FAITH LOST AND REGAINED

With this background in mind, we will not be able to solve the problem of subjectivist faith by opposing faith as a communication medium to faith as an individued and emptied form of experience. For the emptied form of experience only reappears in the communication medium as a code of selection, with accelerated force of strengthening the above-mentioned syndrome of problems. Neither is it sufficient to only conjure up the "contents" and, as many theologians of the first decades of the twentieth century have done, deplore religiosity's "colossal loss of reality", if it is not clear which contents are really able to lead out of the crisis. Furthermore it is insufficient to only demand increased individual or communal engagement, if it is not clear which kind of engagement has to be looked for to find a way out of the crisis.

Rather, we have to impute that the reason why subjectivist faith became evolutionarily successful was that for many people it seemed to offer a simply optimal, or at least, in the history of culture, a superior religiosity. With regard to the individual engagement this is easily understood, because the communication medium "perplexity/sensitive susceptibility" can be attuned to the smallest and finest individual emotions. Subjectivist faith is to a high degree sensitive to and open for the concrete individual, for her/his emotional and affective forms of experience. More precisely, in principle unburdened by almost any content-related religious regards, it is mainly concerned with the individual in his/her relation of dependence. Subjectivist faith covers the content-related side in principle by an abstract theism and a totalitarian religious thought that relates everything--in fact in a seemingly thoughtless

23 Cf. Günter Thomas, *Religion - Ritual - Medien. Zur religiösen Funktion des Fernsehens*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt 1998; G. Thomas a. M. Welker, Einleitung: Religiöse Funktionen des Fernsehens? in: G. Thomas (Hg.), *Religiöse Funktionen des Fernsehens? Medien-, kultur- und religionswissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Westdeutscher Verlag: Opladen 2000.

manner--to God and God to everything.²⁴

God is the "ground of all being," the "all-determining reality," the "cause of everything"--so run the corresponding ciphers and jargon phrases. Dependence and abstract **ubi-presence/omni-potence**, **figure of dependence and omni-quantor**, these are the modes of thought with which a theology attuned to subjectivist faith seemed to secure the "content-related side." Totalitarian religious thought remains undeterred by everything from the ironic queries as to whether God also created my pants button and willed the staggering steps of the drunk, to the very serious questions of theodicy. It seems no less disturbed by the Biblical traditions which contradict this religiosity. It systematically mixes up the power and possibility of God to act creatively, even out of the dust and in the greatest loneliness, with an omni-presence and omni-potence that causes "everything." Yet by simply relating all and everything to God and God to all and everything, it leaves faith behind. It is by no means easy to make clear that totalitarian religious thought winds up, suppresses or stultifies faith. For faith certainly sees the possibility that every event could in principle be related to God. **But faith's interest in God, in the knowledge of God, and in the knowledge of reality in the light of the knowledge of God leads faith to ask where that relationship becomes clear. In totalitarian religious thought's vague assurance that everything is somehow or other related to God, nothing becomes clear.**

With this observation we find a clue to the loss of faith in subjectivist faith. Subjectivist faith follows in a plainly parasitic manner a great discovery of modernity. This is the discovery that in all conscious situations of life the "consciousness of the 'I think'" can be aroused and that this "consciousness of the 'I think'" gives every person an abstract certainty of the steadiness of his/her own existing and of an interpersonal belonging together. Subjectivist faith doubles this certainty of steadiness and relates it to "an Other." It can do so since the "consciousness of the 'I think'" can appear as the feeling of freedom **and** as the feeling of dependence. Thus

24 A whole theological network of critical encounters and movements of the twentieth century have collaborated in the collapse of this religious form of power. This has been a deliberate goal in Bonhoeffer and Moltmann, in many theologies of liberation, and in almost all feminist theologies. At least initial steps in this directions have been made by Barth, Pannenberg, Jüngel, and Tracy, in some process theologies, and in other thinkers and developments. Christological and trinitarian insights and questions were determinative for the efforts to put an end to classical theism (not to be confused with monotheism of the living God). Also insights from the theology of law and from pneumatology, as well as metaphysical, moral and political reasons forced abstract theism to be called into question. Despite all its difficulties (cf. *Creation and Reality*, Introduction) this development has to be supplemented and complemented by an equally serious critique of subjectivist faith.

the "all-determining Other" in the "relation of dependence" is the perfect mirror or shadow of the modern I.²⁵ The presence of this God is activated by the "consciousness of the 'I think'", in the form of the "alternative reading" or in the form of the ever new "message of dependence."

Probably following a remark by Kenneth Burke²⁶, Niklas Luhmann once asked ironically whether "faith (could) not (be) organized like money", and thereby aroused not only pious indignation, but also kindled literary theological activities.²⁷ Subjectivist faith **has** already in many respects "organized" God "like money." The experiences of the "Other" and the "perplexity" are on the one hand always the same and can on the other almost arbitrarily be measured out and heightened. Non-trivial "natural" experiences are scarce and become scarcer still with increasing accustoming. Therefore artificial perplexities are staged and scarcity is continually produced and eliminated, particularly efficiently in the area of electronic media, in connection with situations of "bad news", competitive sports and entertainment music. Much can be said in favor of the supposition: Subjectivist faith and media piety get along together very well.

The recovery of faith presupposes the knowledge that cultural and religious "substance" cannot be gained via totalization and "bad infinity" (Hegel). Faith aims at knowing the coherence of the creative, life-supporting and life-sustaining powers of God and aims at forever better understanding these powers and thus God's being and will. So faith, rightly understood, does want *to find something out and to know something*, even if, in the face of the living God and with regard to what it tries to say with expressions like God's "glory" and "holiness," it is conscious of the temporariness and possible inadequacy of all knowledge of God. Faith is *a special form of cultural knowledge*, which, however, with regard to its main object, the living God, is at all times conscious of its own temporariness and is linked with a high principal readiness to be questioned.

In the conviction of faith God, by referring to the individual person through faith, does not only accept and take seriously the single person in her/his spiritual, bodily, sensory and emotional singularity. In faith people gain a universal dignity. For Christians this dignity is

25 This God is, by the way, the personification of the power of a mechanistic universe.

26 In Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, Cleveland: World, 1962, 355f.

27 See for example Falk Wagner, *Geld oder Gott? Zur Geldbestimmtheit der kulturellen und religiösen Lebenswelt*, Klett: Stuttgart 1984.

that they become "one person with Christ," as Luther says. This means that they become bearers of God's presence on earth. Thus faith combines an interest in the protection and the development of the human personality with the interest in the knowledge of the living God. Wherever this interest is reduced through emptying and individuization, faith is also systematically weakened. One of the most important tasks in the interreligious dialogue in pluralistic societies is to understand how other religions try to ground the dignity of human beings and the protection of the personality (but in doing so to understand the weaknesses and dangers of the neo-protestant style of piety).

The concentration on the living God and on God's freedom is accompanied by a principal sensitivity for the information and knowledge of all the participants in the life of faith. This holds true not only for the active participants or even only those with intellectual master achievements, but also for those who participate only more or less passively in it, and even for those who only seem to enter into the life of faith by attracting pity and sorrow and remembrance. Outsiders may try to book it as "high sensitivity for cultural contingency." They may even mix up faith with the "reduction of complexity and contingency."²⁸ The respect of God's freedom and liveliness combined with the burning interest in the knowledge of God is in fact linked with a pluralistic openness and a high sensitivity and readiness to break up as far as historical changes and shifts in the mentalities are concerned.²⁹ **The interest in "cultural learning" and "spiritual learning" is essential to faith.**

But over against knowledge, also the weaknesses of faith which is penetrated by knowledge must be considered. Faith is in principle highly endangered to be affected by emotions because of the above-mentioned sensitivity for God's freedom and liveliness and for the meaning of the manifold "testimonies" and the concrete personality of the faithful. Perhaps in the current culture many regard this as not problematic or even as a strength of faith (and, with the help of subjectivist faith, they may try to bring this in the "forms" of religious immediacy and a medium of communication). However, the dangers become evident as soon as we understand that cultural and moral moods, media fashions and many other forms of

28 S. N. Luhmann, *Funktion der Religion*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt 1977.

29 The concept of "the witness" is most appropriate to express the relation of the individual believer and the acts of faith to faith in general. The conscious fragmentariness of the own knowledge of God and the simultaneous striving for certainty and authenticity is well expressed in it. I owe this insight to Hans-Georg Gadamer.

what the 19th century ciphered as "Zeitgeist" all too easily operate decisively on sensitive faith and distort or destroy it. The knowledge of the powerlessness of subjectivist faith with regard to these problems is a presupposition for the question for productive alternatives.