



Re-Telling Faith: A Contemporary Philosophical Redraft of Christianity as Hermeneutics

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Some may find it provoking, a philosopher interfering with the affairs of the Church, of theology, of faith. But the provocation is at the same time a justification. This article hinges on two premises. First, Christianity does not have a transparent, fully accessible conceptual ‘core’; second, its late-modern historico-cultural form is at the same time its narrative form. These two premises would be the cornerstone of a philosophical Christian hermeneutics, or better: of a philosophy of late-modern Christianity as a hermeneutics. In this philosophy, the so-called crisis of Christianity has nothing to do with the Christian message as such, but everything with its narrative form. Who is concerned about revelation and Christ’s message, should therefore focus on the form and not ‘operate’ on the content.

I set out on this approach as a religiously or spiritually motivated person who means well, as heir to Christianity, with a certain philosophical background.¹ This seems an appropriate methodological position since it does not start from a pre-given truth – a notion that post-metaphysical thought has left behind. In this text, the terms ‘Christian’ and ‘metaphysics’ are supposed to take along all their theological and philosophical diversity without this diversity impeding the argument in any way.

Sitz im Leben

Every school, every care institute, every firm or service is concerned with its mission and identity nowadays. An organization that is not completely lost to instrumentalism and neutrality will try to articulate its aims and aspirations in a discourse that goes from broadly-ethical via spiritual to straight confessional – without this sequence implying

¹ I refer to Martin Heidegger’s *Identity and difference*, specifically for the notions of difference and abyss; to Jacques Derrida’s *Margins – of Philosophy*, especially for the notions of deconstruction, difference and delay; to Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Deconstruction of Christianity* in two volumes, *Dis-Enclosure* and *Admiration*; to Gianni Vattimo’s *Beyond Christianity*.

an evaluation. While the demand for identity becomes ever more imperative, it seems to become ever more difficult to detect, formulate and promote an identity along this line. The standard traditional method, the centrifugal and deductive implementation of identity does not (always) work anymore. And wherever this method should still hold, the air soon fills with fighting terms like ‘diversity’, ‘secularization’ and ‘privacy’. Those terms are not always understood very well, yet for a long time they blocked the search for identity. Here, I will develop a possible strategy to articulate Christian identity. This approach hinges on the abovementioned premise that the crisis in Christianity has to do with its narrative format, not with its theological content that is ‘eternal’ in a way. Contemporary hermeneutics might be helpful in dealing with this crisis. Differential thought developed some interesting notions that a search for identity can benefit from.

The Hermeneutic Frame

Many people consider the identity-problem as a symptom of the bankruptcy of Christianity, Christian faith and the Church. Others try to resource the Christian ‘tale’ (narrative, story, myth) and recontextualize it. My argumentation sets out on a different course. Christianity is just going through yet another crisis, a Biblical ‘reboot’, and an institutional ‘refurbish’. What did go bankrupt is a certain hermeneutic, namely the traditional narrative format that is supposed to articulate (explain, prove, impose, reveal, etc.) an identity. The notion of one, full, eternal Tale has ceased to work and this has nothing to do with its content. In fact, this bankruptcy is the best that could happen to Christianity since now, it finds itself challenged to look for an actualized articulation. In order to turn the problem into challenge, which is the true meaning of the word ‘crisis’, I will bring together some elements from contemporary differential philosophy that can help to work out a new format for ‘a Christian tale’. If there is such a thing. And if we can recognize it as such. And if we can do something with it.

This hermeneutic actualization of Christianity promises to be a delicate exercise. It is typical of Christianity to relate in a healthily ambiguous and provocative manner to any culture. On the one hand, Christianity cannot remove itself from culture, to hide in an ahistorical, acultural faith without any charisma or effect in the world. It is very improbable that Christianity could survive without a firm footing in (material) culture, even in a devotion that sometimes borders on the superstition. Indeed, probably even the most subtle mysticism is somehow born out of this ‘matter’. On the other hand, Christianity can never totally inscribe itself, totally immerse in a culture. Its critical voice does not fit within a purely political or economic discourse. It has been like this since the rise of the

prophets and the travels of Saint Paul. Not that there is any trace of revolutionary ambition, on the contrary. Christianity does not change a *jod* in the laws of the world. A theological revolution, a conversion, only reaches the heart and the heart motivates politicians. But the heart will never become itself a political category and a Christian theology can never be about anything else than the heart and all other metaphors that come along with this one. Maybe that is precisely what theologians who want to ‘market’ the Church forget. Each *aggiornamento* must beware itself of all such lethal in- or deculturation tendencies and carefully feel for the most meaningful relation and tension between charisma and culture.

At first sight, some may feel, this brings back an outdated theological model wherein a superhistorical content is ‘redeemed’ of its historical, secular instances. But this is not the case here. I do not need any superhistorical or indeed supernatural content to make my point. This does not at all imply that I agree with radical secularization models, on the contrary. Nor must this mean that I consider Christianity to have reached its ultimate destiny in any form of modern program or ideology like the Declaration of Human Rights. Christianity and its message are not about either an eternal or a secular content – an opposition whereof I doubt the legitimacy. Christianity is not a container-concept with on one side contents that remain unaffected by the world and its event, its history, and on the other side contents that were, are, or will be totally realized in the world, within history. At this point, instead of such a container, I would defend the notion of an open world where meaning is ‘advent’.

Meaning as opening (i.e. the event of world) has a name in contemporary continental philosophy: difference. This word marks the impossibility to close the world in on itself, to ‘enclose’ the world. It also means that thought cannot capture this world in a stable system of oppositions, like true – false, good – bad, supernature – nature, or even Church – state, Christianity – culture, belief – knowledge, etc. the alleged relations between these alleged autonomous entities cannot be derived from an original unity or will never be integrated in a still to realize unity in the future.

As the ‘tale’ is concerned, difference shows that there is no pure substance where the tale is about, that there is no ‘outer’ criterion that can declare a tale right or wrong. Difference is where a tale can no longer be declared true-or-lie. Difference suspends such final judgments. It considers truth an effect of tales instead of pre-given from an origin. Truth has more of reliability and loyalty than of an established ‘*adaequatio rei et intellectus*’. Being does not go on separately from thinking and telling. Tales can reveal the meaning of existence without comparing them with original and eternal truth.

This tension or difference shows up at the root of Christianity and is ‘opened’ by kenosis. The tension reappears in the need for a new

(Christian) hermeneutics, where, unlike in dualism, the world and its tales are one. There is no world outside the tale, it is in the tale that a world comes to be. There is no pre-given Christian truth or world or fact that a tale can or has to comply with. There is no Teller, no false tale against a true one. This is not epistemological anarchy, this is how rhetoric and even poetic workings have become acceptable aside the traditional logic mechanics. Identity is now a narrative matter and no longer a matter of substance or predication. It appears in tales that reveal – but what? and how?

The Hermeneutic Conditions

A Tale is Not One, Not Full and Never Finished

To start, I need to show two things. First, the notion of one full tale has become obsolete and, second, our culture still longs for and believes in such a tale. If both these statements are acceptable, then it might be that we are near the crux of the crisis, because tensions like these always mark crises.

But even before I can start to show this, I need to show that the one, full tale never existed except as possibility, illusion, ideal. Where am I supposed to find such tale, where should I look for it? Has such tale ever been formulated, edited, published, reviewed? If there is such a tale, it can only be the result of an operation on the *depositum fidei*, like a register or summary or an index or a selection. But the *depositum fidei* is endless, obscure, opaque, complex, plural, disordered. It is impossible to turn it into a ‘file’ that can be searched. Justified selection is out of the question. This leaves us with yet another question, namely whether there is such a thing as a ‘core’ of Christianity? Presumably, the lack of such a ‘core’ is precisely what makes Christianity ‘scandalous’.

This does not imply that faith is irrational. It simply means that in these matters, we can trust a very important law in hermeneutics, namely ‘overdetermination’. This is typical of each narrative system that carries meaning only and always in a round-about way. It allows in principle for a complete grasp of the meaning of the system without actually having to go through each tale. ‘In principle’, because this completeness can never be established in reality. Since, in fact, neither the ‘core’ nor the ‘whole’ of the *depositum* are as such accessible and since the latter actually grows every day, no operation on the *depositum* can yield a one, full, eternal, finished tale.

In the background of faith, catechesis and theology, the notion of the tale was present, but never explicit and it is only now that the question is posed whether the tale ever really did exist in another way than as an idea(1). Now that modernity has questioned the evidence of

Christianity and the legitimacy of its message, this tale seems not at hand. This, again, says nothing about the aforementioned legitimacy but all the more about the format of the tale.

Where, then, does this notion of a master-tale come from? This is a huge question since it refers to the whole history of Western theology and (its) metaphysics. This history has generated the notion that the world is a finite structure, a complete system that carries its own explanation within itself. In the history of philosophy, the notion of the master-tale only gradually seeps in. Actually, it is not until modernity that it explicitly comes forward, as befitting the system of objectivity and totality. Since Descartes, reality becomes an autonomous and complete presence, independent of thought. This dualism gave rise to the idea that physical reality could be totally – i.e. all of it, not as a whole – re-presented in thought. Of course, philosophy was already acquainted with truth as a sort of ‘adequacy’ or ‘adequation’ (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*) between things and thoughts, but before modernity, this adequation had its ground outside the world of thoughts and things, beyond subject and object, in Good or in God. After Descartes, this is no longer the case. Since then, there is the subject on the one hand and the object on the other, both thus organized that the adequation is structurally possible, provided that the correct epistemological procedures are applied.

Actually, it was Leibniz, half a century younger than Descartes, who added the final touch to the notion of master-tale with his grand principle: nothing is without reason. In other words: everything that belongs to the object can be accounted for, can be legitimized, understood, known by the subject. Only then was the notion of the possibility in principle of a total explanation of reality officially announced. And this grand principle, against the backdrop of Cartesian dualism, still holds sway over metaphysics. Some still believe that the scientific total explanation of the world, once accomplished, will make religion redundant.

This digression wants to show the following. The notion of a master-tale is established and is not eternal or original, is not evident or even necessary. Philosophy has, however, for a long time accepted this notion. Major shifts in cultural and philosophical self-understanding around 1900 show how this notion, once established, now seems to be losing its validity. This inevitably also goes for the notion that Christian identity is a matter of the ‘one full eternal’ tale, written down somewhere outside the world, unaffected by history, since this tale also has the format of a (scientific) total explanation.

Such an explanation indeed requires a fixed basic structure under, above or behind reality. It was considered possible to represent this structure, in all its purity and clarity, with the aid of appropriate epistemological strategies. This representation (theory, explanation) measures the value of the world at any given time and any given

place. But the question is not simply whether such a structure exists – outside metaphysics’ evidence – but also whether there is a Christian version of this structure and, if so, if this has to be the best one.

There is a school of thought that renounces such basic structure, called critique of metaphysics. Within this school, the Christian version of such structure, together with all other versions, is renounced. Within this school the philosophical meaning of Christianity does not lie in the discovery, formulation or revelation of a basic structure, but almost in its opposite. Critique of metaphysics allows Christianity to warn against any absolute faith in the structures, theories, institutes, systems of the world, be they political, moral, scientific, etc.

Delay and Abyss

Without a basic structure, there will de facto be no full tale. Some maintain that it’s just a matter of temporary delay. According to them, there is a basic structure and we are achieving its full explanation. The fact of the tale becomes the future proof of this basic structure that is for now only an article of faith. This structure is nothing more or less than the ground of the truth that is revealed in the full tale. But are delay and ground really understood correctly here?

Delay should not be understood pejoratively. It is not the privative idea of a bottomless pit, but the liberating experience of an abyss. An abyss only frightens who clings to a ground, to a basic structure. Delay is no longer a measure for the incompleteness of a tale, but rather the promise of endless meaning. The abyss is not where meaning disappears, but where new meaning appears.

Here is an opportunity to keep tales away from each system that validates tales according to a pre-given truth principle. The idea of a normative master-tale where nothing can ever be added to, that only can be approached, always closer– this is the traditional definition of delay – and closer, works rather counterproductive for meaning. Such systems, e.g. that of objectivity, freeze and petrify tales. To read tales in the register of objectivity, however, only generates bad theology.

Delay does not guide tales from an origin to an end, but corrects the notion of a full tale. Delay accompanies all attempts to compose a full explanation as their impossibility. The abyss is not a structure that is added to the ground or that overthrows this ground, it is an event that opens the ground. In this opening is revealed that the ground is itself without ground and that there is no reason to consider the fullness of a tale as mandatory. The tale that renounces the ambition of fullness can only open up to the new, the coming, the other – an ‘other’ that is not a function of the present, of full presence.

Delay and abyss are open to the ‘other’, which is only possible when the tale is not supposed to be full (of itself). A full tale could

never endure the ‘other’ new content. They also show that fullness is not expected, because that would presuppose that the other is required to ‘fulfill’ the tale, so that it can be integrated and loses its alterity. The tale that confesses to delay and abyss is a finite tale. This finitude, again, has nothing privative since it is not put over as ‘limited’ against the fullness of a tale. This fullness is no longer an aspiration, not even a narrative category anymore. Yet each tale stands on its own so that it is ‘full’ in a finite way. It is not full in that it renders all other tales superfluous or wrong.

The tale is endless. There is no counter that measures its distance from emptiness on one side and fullness on the other. The endlessness has to be seen as endlessly ending.

Endlessness and Finitude

Imagine that no more love poetry would be written, because for every stage in courtship the ultimate, universal and most efficient phrase had been composed. What a dreadful affair love would become . . . Suppose the Bible was finished, as a book. Suppose the Bible would lend itself no longer to inscription in life, in each tale, time and again, and that those old words would die. Then the Bible would become useless, except maybe for exegetes and historians. The Bible ‘ends’, arrives in each life and the process of life is – until further notice – endless.

Suppose – though this was already refuted above – that the ‘core’ of Christianity could be articulated in a few words, e.g. ‘charity, ‘incarnation’ and ‘resurrection’, and that faith consists in the detection and communication of the signs of this ‘core’. Why, then, would we dispose of this enormous depositum *fidei*, two thousand years of tradition, a whole Bible, an army of saints, an inextinguishable devotion (or ‘superstition’), endless literature, a strong centrally directed organization that represents billions of faithful? Because there must be a path for everyone that leads to God. Because faith always follows a detour instead of a straight line – there is no *via regia* leading to God. Because charity, incarnation and resurrection cannot present themselves as transparent logic concepts or moral precepts. Because the message of Christ cannot be reformulated in a deductive or inductive way. As such, the history of Christianity is not only a process of ‘purification’ (nominalism, Protestantism, modernity, secularization, etc.) but also and inevitably of safeguarding the unyielding nature of its mystic mysterious scandalous core – the scandal being, again, that Christianity cannot present a core as such.

The *depositum* is certainly not a modern, cumulative notion. It consists of an innumerable amount of traces that over and over again, like old wine in new wineskins, reappear as fresh perspectives. This way, the *depositum* avoids petrification in either massive tradition to

be accomplished as such on the ground of it always having been that way or old stuff to be rejected *in toto* and replaced by something else for no other reason than that it is something else. The straight way to God is the detour by the abyss and the delay. But, again, this detour is not a remedy or compensation that, as in psychoanalysis, ‘re-closes’ or ‘re-fills’ the tale. The detour makes sense through the acknowledgment of its finitude, its approaching character. The detour never leads back to a straight path, because there is no straight path. Every path is a detour here.

How can this endless finitude be meaningful? Christianity keeps at its roots an unsolvable constellation of ‘splits’, paradoxes that stay open because its core is not really a core. The Passion is Resurrection, the humiliation is the exaltation, man is equal to God and God became man, the wood of the manger is the wood of the Cross, being in-the-world but not-from-the-world, etc. The ‘is’ never produces an identity or even a logical relation. But what does this most annoying word in Western history, at least according to Nietzsche, mean? The examples here are of a very diverse theological nature. I will elaborate the last one.

Nothing and Opening

It is obvious that not-being-from-the-world does not mean: being in another world. The hermeneutics that I resort to does not accept a two-world-model (nature – supernature) in the traditional sense. There are two world-experiences, without there being one or two ‘real’ worlds behind the experiences. The world is the experience, it is itself the event and reception of meaning, as radical hermeneutics would have it.

Traditionally, philosophy distinguishes between two opposite approaches to the world, to the constellation of reality, namely an immanent one and a transcendent one. In the first case, the world generates and holds its own full meaning, to which no outside (world) can contribute anything. In the second case, ‘this’ world receives its meaning only from another, more true and real world. In itself, ‘our’ world remains meaningless, absurd. But, ‘tertium datur’ when it can be seen that transcendence and immanence do not ‘oppose’. It is not about two realities or substances, or about two separate worlds, but about two perspectives on ‘world’, namely a closed (immanent) and an open (transcendent) one. Transcendent no longer means: referring to another world; transcendence no longer means: another world. Transcendence in Heidegger means that humans belong to the world of beings, but not totally, like all other beings. Humans also belong to Being, which is not a thing apart from all things. Heidegger’s transcendence is the ‘movement’ of (ontological) difference. This means precisely that Being and beings belong together without any

logic relating them together. Being and beings do not ‘derive’ from each other, though they cannot ‘be’ without each other. They cannot even be said to ‘be’, as if this one word covers it for both.

The term that denotes or rather: problematizes the relation between immanence and transcendence is ‘difference’. Heidegger and Wittgenstein contended that the world cannot generate its own meaning. Does this mean that we have to rely on another world to grant us the meaning of this one? But Nietzsche had already refuted any (philosophical) reference to another world, to an allegedly ‘true’ world where the meaning of this world would be kept. So, where does meaning come from?

The world can be ‘open’. This opening is differential, because it is no structure or property of the world (a definition that explains something about the world), it does not open to another world, and it frustrates every attempt to close the world on itself, as a sameness, an identity, a totality. This difference enables us to understand the distinction between an open and a closed world, between in-and-of-the-world and in-but-not-of-the-world.

Traditional philosophy established transcendence and immanence as complements, as a transcendent realm (heaven) apart from an immanent one (‘ours’). But since Heidegger, transcendence and immanence are hermeneutic movements that in this context could be translated as ‘world-opening’ and ‘world-closing’. These, as I said, are not two opposite states of an objective world. These are at most two disagreeing statements about the ‘same’ world, about the way we experience the meaning of what we call reality. Modern tradition maintains that this meaning belongs to the world itself, others – and this is the view of this article – tend to consider meaning as coming from an outside that is not another world. The former cannot decide on the opening, because modern thought cannot discern it – it is the shibboleth of the world rather than a clear epistemological relation like opposition.

Again, this is not about two worlds or about one world that figures in two different tales. There are two tales, the total explanation (i.e. the old tale) and the opening (i.e. the new tale). Together, they mean world, without ‘world’ being the thing, the substance that unifies both tales in full truth about itself. The latter tale is the dissolution of the former and the former is the denial of the latter.

No term can predicate the relation between both ‘worlds’ – ‘open’ and ‘closed’ are not just two properties of a substance ‘world’ – or suspend their difference and thereby close the opening. There is no property that can be ascribed to one world and denied to the other. Both worlds are not (ontologically) different and yet they are not (ontologically) identical. Both worlds belong to the realm of difference.

This opening is nothing, not a thing, without ground and itself not a ground – remember the abyss. That there is opening without

a world that appears in the opening, could be an interpretation of 'ex nihilo'. Meaning is not content that is supplied from beyond the opening, opening is a name for meaning arriving in thought, making our world meaningful. Meaning has no origin, no maker behind the opening. Again, opening is not a place, nor a structure.

Inclusion, Resistance, Testimony

A tale does not derive its truth from any pre-given or preceding content. Why indeed this thoughtless, yet persistent preference for an original content in the form of a 'concept' or a 'word'? I am exploring here the inclusive purport of a tale, that clearly leaves the system of objectivity behind. Everyone can tell a tale, read a text, gabble a poem or a script (or Mass ...). A tale is always clothed in materiality, if not, no-one could ever hear, see, read, etc. it. This materiality should contain a certain 'involvement' – that is not necessarily the theme of the tale, but can never be totally isolated from it.

Incarnation of meaning implies an infusion of 'soul' and of 'spirit', it requires inspiration or desincarnation. It has to make a difference who tells a tale. This difference does not belong to the literal order of a text, but finds itself between the 'liveliness' and the 'deadliness' of the letter. All words and their sequence remain the same and yet, the teller makes a difference there. Think about how Christ does not change a jot about the law and yet at the same time completely overturns the law. Telling has to be testifying. The relation between a person and a text is not neutral or abstract – if there is a distinction or a relation at all – but belongs to its very theme. This is why a hermeneutics like this cannot allocate a theme solely to a text, as 'objective', pre-given, isolated from the subject, the person. It is precisely the connection between teller and text that becomes the silent or implicit theme of the tale.

It is not enough to tell a tale to make it 'fertile' or productive. A tale is never purely spiritual, but is told, written, played, acted out. This material aspect intrinsically belongs to its meaning. Traditional metaphysics thought not, did not wish it so. According to classical communication theories, a message should be transmitted purely, with each material aspect or effect reversible and 'deductible' from the pure conceptual meaning. The Word that was in the beginning, that was with God (as divine intention, Plan of Creation) and actually was God (Revelation) must be kept in absolute original purity, uncontaminated by history or existence. But what happens when we draw the theological conclusions from the bankruptcy of Cartesian dualism? Then this Word is freed and passed on to all people who 'be-flesh' and again 'be-soul' the Word. Then we notice that the continuity does not lie in the maintenance of an original meaning, because that was freed, but in the soul and the flesh itself, in the tradition.

If what precedes a testimony is from a different than a narrative order, this means that there is no 'first true tale' that directs the content and the truth value of a testimony, of an inclusive tale. Testimony is a matter of 'truthworthiness' rather than of truth in the traditional sense of objective 'adequation' to a state of affairs. In this inclusiveness, Christianity becomes itself a hermeneutics. Christianity does not dissolve into a field that is called hermeneutics, it becomes itself a very particular hermeneutics, called 'Christianity', a Christian understanding of tales instead of an understanding of Christian tales.

Tales should never die, peter out, petrify in the flesh. Materiality should not become the new teleology, replacing spirituality or conceptuality. The truth of a tale lies not in its 'acting out', just as it does not lie in its total theoretical explanation. There is no ultimate deed that justifies the tale *ex post*, just as there is no principle that justifies the tale *a priori*. Incarnation is inspiring when it produces new tales, which is desincarnation. This is why it is wrong to consider the universal declaration of human rights the ultimate goal of Christianity. Without permanent inspiration and re-telling, persistent questioning and testifying, this declaration remains a dead text.

Testimony takes place in another time regime than planning. Planning is linear, like a combined circuit of deductions and inductions. It starts from a situation, the 'data', and some immutable laws according to which the data values change over time. The language of the data and the laws have to be identical, so that they can be merged in a method, the actual plan. This warrants a solution, a result within a definable time interval, to be formulated in still the same language: an algorithm. The laws are considered eternal and the data are the total description of the relevant 'now' and the result is nothing more than the next 'now'. The equation does not leave the future open, planning goes from 'now' to any next 'now'. Planning extrapolates a sequence of 'now'-moments in order to avoid a future in the sense of an advent. Planning closes the world and therefore, planning is the current echo of the traditional 'full tale'. Planning presupposes the notion of the plan of history of the world, never actually presented but in principle present as the eternal now. Globalization is the world becoming plan: Hegel for managers.

Testifying does exactly the opposite and opens up world. Testifying has nothing to do with deduction and induction. Testifying does not start from a total set of data, but rather from a 'lack of world', where 'lack' has no privative meaning. This lack is not material, but opens upon a promise, on an advent that takes place beyond our initiative, beyond our planning and calculation. It's not a lack of data, but a lack that sprouts from the complacency of the system of data, laws end results. It's about the sterility of the equation, of planning.

Testifying is not copying a pre-given doctrine but takes up the thread of the promise, of the advent. What comes towards us is not

only what is still ahead of us, also the past comes towards us – and not as eternity, as accomplished. Inclusive tales tell about a past that never fully became present, never was a ‘now’, and of a future that will never become a ‘now’, never be fully present, that endlessly ends, stays open. If the future and the promise would not be handed over from the past, then we could not take up its thread, as tradition, and we would have to ‘invent’ it, which would undo its character of promise. A promise on human initiative is planning. A tale becomes Christian when it leaves the planning and starts to testify, becomes inclusive.

Christianity becomes hermeneutics when Revelation is no longer a message by-and-about God, but God itself. Christ did not come and tell us a tale about man only to withdraw from the story and return to heaven. Christ is the tale of the Passion, with Jesus of Nazareth as protagonist. This is an argument against such ‘heresies’ that hold that Christ never fully became man and that the Passion did not really affect God. This is not a heresy because it denies a certain predicative content, but because it denies the inclusive character of the Passion as a tale.

The resistance that hides in the materiality has another effect besides the testimony. Materiality is where words, metaphors, meanings are not simply at our disposal. Though our thinking may still be heavily Cartesian and marked by an obsession with certainty and method, spirituality does not share that obsession. Spirituality recognizes and lives the materiality to its full – even into and through the darkest night. Proposals by ‘modern’ theologians to abolish the Holy Father because modern people no longer understand it, do not show evidence of any spirituality. Hence my persistent proposal for a theological or spiritual vocabulary, not to recruit fresh Christians, but to grant people of today – often spiritual analphabets – an access to the spiritual conversation about motives and motifs that lie beyond the reach of planning.

Adverbiality and Centrifugality

Probably, the Christian tale needs to be read adverbially and not adjectively. A tale does not ‘adject’ a certain content or property to itself to become a Christian tale. If this is true, then we should be able to distinguish ‘Christian’ as an adjective from other adjective determinations of tales. Christian tales will always treat of love, care, endurance, hope, sacrifice, trust, etc. Of course, non-Christian tales also deal with those topics. But in Christian tales, a certain modality is heard, an echo of St Vincent de Paul’s ‘davantage’ of St Jan Berchmans’ ‘extraordinary’, itself echoes of Christ’s “Truly truly I say to you . . .”, the excess that frustrates each moral and spiritual accountancy.

The modality does not change the ‘literal’ meaning. Care remains care, but to the thoughtful eye, calculating care is something else than loving care. At first sight, any interaction with someone who has been declared clinically dead seems useless and in no way connected with care. But talking to a person in this condition is not an isolated, autonomous part of the care process that can be applied, upon deliberation with the team, after an already started episode – a more ‘efficient’ one – of the care process. It is an inherent, but heavily underestimated and even forgotten modality of care itself. It is precisely because this is not a content matter, adjectively applied and scientifically established as efficient, that the ‘shibboleth’-effect can work here – the shibboleth is marked by e.g. a lighted candle. Indeed, only someone with spiritual antennae can discern the difference. This difference is calculated right out of medical planning. And yet, this belongs to care.

When, then, does an open, inclusive and adverbial tale become ‘Christian’? Years ago, the question would have been: “How do we recognize the workings of the Holy Spirit?” Not by his signature under a care plan or education program. Those are invented and written by human beings. It has nothing to do with Christian identity, every school and hospital does that. But it is hard to read Christ’s parables as education programs or the Merciful Samaritan as a care plan. Who can force his employee to be ‘have compassion’, and how do you measure this ‘compassion’ in a performance interview? and what if compassion hits you outside job hours? or you have compassion for a patient that is not ‘yours’? and in which column belong the two denarii that the Samaritan leaves with the inn-keeper, promising to bring more?

Suppose that ‘open, inclusive and adverbial’ could function as (respectively philosophical, ethical and theological?) criteria for the establishment of the spirituality of a tale, then I think that they would have to refer back to the spatiality, the irreconcilable straddle, the opening mentioned above. But is there something like a typically Christian spatiality? The differences between humiliation and exaltation etc. seem to me valid candidates to be ‘typically Christian’ – without affirming here that every spatiality has to be Christian. Nevertheless, I do see an intrinsic, though not necessarily exclusive connection between trinity, with its own non-metaphysical dialectics of humiliation-exaltation (kenosis), and incarnation, the arriving in the world without ever belonging to it, ‘on the one hand’ and difference ‘on the other’.

There must be an opening in ‘space-time’, the abyss and the delay, where I can take position, as the only guarantee of my trustworthiness, to tell that ‘good’ is never ‘good enough’ and that the calculating mind must never draw the ultimate frames.

To avoid misunderstandings: this is not about a series of slots, like in a mail box, where you can deposit tales. The Christian tale is not

a different tale, but a ‘tale-different’, adverbial. The spacing must not be taken too literally, but cannot be reduced to a ‘mere’ style figure’ either. This is about a hermeneutic opening, a being-open-to-meaning of a world that does not itself generate a world.

To take the spacing seriously is to renounce its enclosure. This enclosure would be a cognitive appropriation by means of an addition, a predicative or adjective operation. The insertion of a certain term, statement, truth in a given tale would then ‘fulfil’ its meaning. If opening implies a renunciation of appropriation, then the tale at that opening is centrifugal, which means that it is marked by alterity and stands in the light of the other, the promise, the advent.

Our culture realizes, often implicitly, that current philosophy is marked by Christianity. The opening of the world could be its philosophical inheritance and its translation. We can see, however, how philosophy often tries hard to deny its Christian roots and provenance. Though philosophy can only take up the opening as such, no further, it can permit itself a theological statement: a closed, exclusive (or objective) tale that is adjective in that it hinges on a certain autonomous content cannot on these grounds be considered Christian. Every stronger contention cannot be philosophically legitimated and is suspected of arbitrariness.

Here, light is shed on the relation between philosophy and theology. Philosophy is like the *Guardians of the Secret* in Jackson Pollock’s painting. In this painting, the set of figures is interrupted (overpainted) by a scene that is in no way translatable into the figurative set. The secret is visible, but only as secret, it is not even ‘integrated’ in the figurative continuity of the guardians. Philosophy knows about a secret it has to guard, without knowing what the secret is, without being able to decipher it. If the secret itself would be secret, then it would be futile, since no-one would know there was a secret, let alone what it could be. The fact of the secret is public, is even object of debate, without the partners in that debate having access to the secret. Authors like Richard Dawkins, who keep telling and writing that there is no secret (thanks to biology), keep on digging up the secret as secret. As Fernando Pessoa, alias Alberto Caeiro, says: the secret is that there is no secret – but then this has to remain secret, except to the poet.

Thought and faith

Philosophy guards the secret without knowing what it is, i.e. in mutual faith. The secret is not a certain content that hides behind the opening, outside the world. The secret delineates, circumscribes (literally) the opening. Theology attributes this opening to an Author, philosophy does not. This Author is not the result of thought but

is posited by a specific faith that is not quite identical to the faith wherein thought rests. The opening has an inside and an outside. The outside, guarded by philosophy and culture, points at the world; the inside, i.e. the outside of the world to those who know that the world is opening, is laden with all semiotics and semantics of theology, with all its grammar and vocabulary. This inside of the philosophical outside may well be exclusively theological, as what falls outside of philosophical reach. But is it Christian? Is there something 'islamic' that is inaccessible to philosophy? Or are religions closer to philosophy than the anti-religion of Christianity? Do religions (i.e. other than Christianity) relate adjectively to the world?

That would mean that the world is the sum of all religious and spiritual enterprises, of humanity and its myths, religions and philosophies and that Christianity alone 'opens' the world. In its turn, that would mean that the greatest achievement of current philosophy of religion is its radical atheism. At precisely the very moment when my religious reflex appeals to the intervention of a just God, updated to the role of super-manager, to grant me the happiness I deserve, I can only experience his absence. If this culture finds itself in crisis, then this means it is painfully aware of God's absence that is no denial of a presence but precedes this presence. Our culture is marked by the death of God, by the atheist (or, with Bataille, atheological) experience. Again, this is a hermeneutic crisis, not a theological one. We must leave the tales with God as substantial presence behind.

The difference between the inside and the outside of the opening is not predicative, logical. It is marked by a name that has no representation whatsoever and therefore leaves everything open: 'God'. This is the only philosophical way God enters Christianity and culture after onto-theo-logy: as name.

Atheism does not appear here in its superficial form: the contention that God does not exist. This is still a theistic way of thinking, but with a negative prefix. A more philosophical atheism starts from the 'a'-that points at any form of theism, of onto-theo-logy. This atheism does not proclaim the existence or non-existence of God, but only acknowledges that the indestructible name does not represent anything. It is precisely in that name that all images and idols, eternal principles and norms are brought down. Philosophy will enthusiastically befriend any religion that starts from this 'a-' (the 'ex nihilo') instead of from a theism.

Most religions, however, try to hide and close the experience of 'a-'. One of those attempts was the famous 'leap' out of the world into salvation, as explored by Kierkegaard. This actually denied the atheist experience totally. There is no dialectic solution to the atheist experience, which means that every faith experience and the tale that tells of this experience (not of faith itself) should be read in the atheist register. By this, I mean that Christian identity and 'its' tales

cannot be found in the denial of atheist experience or in ‘cultural Christianity’.

Here, I contend boldly that only Christianity as an anti-religion is able to ‘signify’ the inside-out of the atheist experience and that all philosophy and religions that are structured as a theism, replacing ‘God’ with ‘Spirit’, ‘Matter’, ‘Society’, ‘History’, etc. – on the ground of the latter’s salvation economy – inevitably belong to a closing world. Salvation consists, philosophically or hermeneutically speaking, in the opening of the world, belongs to an world-as-opening. As I said, whoever states that the world no longer needs the Christian tale because now we have the human rights discourse, makes a very serious mistake, namely the ethical enclosure of the world.

It is not dialectics, not deconstruction and not Buddhist *koans* that open the world. It is the opening ‘/’ between humiliation and exaltation, etc., that makes a tale Christian. This could be expected, but the question rises whether this ‘/’ sorts a whole set of pairs on the inside of the outside of the world. I suppose it does, precisely in the way the blessings on the Mount do. It is only when seen from the opening (philosophy, critique of metaphysics) or from the mountain (biblical theology) that the world takes on another hue, that world becomes adverbially different, namely ‘blessed’ – something else than ‘nice’. What is to Biblical exegesis ‘going up a mountain’ is what to philosophy is ‘step into the abyss’ and ‘stand at the opening’. ‘Abyss’ and ‘mountain’ are the two best metaphors I can find to point at the outside of the world and its inside.

Conclusion

Tales that tell about the signs and wisdom in 1Cor1,22 are not without meaning, but are not Christian tales as in: tales that evoke, repeat, signify, remember the Christian message and so found a Christian ‘identity’. Those are the tales of the world, that the world tells about itself and therefore not narratively different from the tales at the mythical birth of the world. Christianity opened the world, prepared by the Old Testament (or the Earlier Testimony) in an ethical-historical register that is unique among all mythical traditions.

Philosophy thematizes the opening (as event, as verb) like the Old Testament. Then YHWH showed the Hebrews how a world without the opening of meaning would look like: the waters would close (again), the world would close off and all meaning would be gone. Replace ‘waters’ by ‘technologies’ or ‘globalization’ and we have roughly the same scenario. To deliver the world onto technology, onto globalization is to dissolve all meaning. A massive economic logic and the values in its equations will ultimately suppress all

meaning. Philosophy and religion can warn against this threat, as best as they can, but have no ‘counter-tale’.

A Christian tale is not a ‘counter-tale’ or a ‘contrast-tale’ because it reveals another content or other facts or because it reverses the truth or denounces a teller or installs a shibboleth on its own account – then it would be no more than a worldly tale. It becomes a counter-tale when it suspends and perverts the logic of the world in and by the ‘/’. This perversion cannot be reduced to a figure of logic (of market, politics, science, etc.) but carries the tale there where it can no longer be understood, verified, operated upon by such logic.

This article started from the contention that the crisis in Christianity is not a purely theoretical or theological, but a hermeneutical matter. There is no need to rewrite or recontextualize any Christian content, it’s the narrative form that needs adjustment. The traditional tale does not ‘work’ anymore, which leaves Christianity out of cultural experience. Instead of the illusion of a consistent and transparent tale, we have a complex tradition, a permanent de-placement that is faith. This has to be read as promise instead of lack, because of the detour, the delay, abyss and finitude that turn the tale into an endless promise. Its external reference lies not in the fullness of the origin, but in the nothing of the *ex nihilo*. This nothing only appears at the opening of the world. This opening is not a theoretical concept or attribute, but an inclusive, material event of promise. The opening is an appeal, not a representation. At the opening, the future is no extrapolation of a now, nor an addition of content. The future as advent is adverbial instead of adjective, the world changes without becoming another or a bigger world, without having to compare itself to another world. Centrifugal promise makes thought and faith, the tale of the world, a matter of trust. The tale offers no guarantee whatsoever.

Where is God in all this? To hermeneutics, God is the name at the opening, in whose name tales are told that we call Christian without staging a God as such, literally. In his name, philosophy and theology befriend each other at the opening. Theology relates differently to the name than philosophy. Every identity, however precarious, thrives on that friendship. In this friendship, tales become Christian.

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