

## Papers on Religion

**East and West.**  
**Philosophy, ethics, politics**  
**and human rights**

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But seek through that, which Allah has given you, the home of the thereafter; and, do not forget your share of the world. And do good as Allah has done good to you. And desire not corruption in the land. Indeed, Allah does not like corrupters.

(Quran 28:77)



For

Ahmad Cherri

Mohammad Mahdi Fallah

Ram Adhar Mall

Ali Ashgar Mosleh

Jarot Wagyudi

Asfa Widiyanto



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Sic Deo fide, quasi rerum successus omnis a te, nihil a Deo penderet; ita tamen iis operam admove, quasi tu nihil, Deus omnia solus sit facturus.<sup>1</sup>

## Preface

I have collected here a few lectures I gave in the last two years in Iran and Indonesia on matters of religion, interculturality and the interfaith dialogue. I have expanded some in order to refer to recent political events and I added a new piece on a recent event which in my view shows in a looking glass where the concrete problems of a fruitful dialogue between religions lie.

If matters of religion and of the dialogue between religions should be more than an empty academic exercise we must first of all ask ourselves where this dialogue should take place, who will be the partners, and what result we can expect. Some remarks I make in some papers give a hint at where the difficulties of this dialogue in the contemporary world lie. But let me here in the preface put the problem more explicitly!

The official authorities on all sides are mostly persons devoid of any sincerity, spirituality or even basic common decency; they are politicians, even if they wear the robes of clerics. This is my personal experience over a long time in this business as regards Christianity and Islam, and with this dialogue I am concerned here above all. To what extent it is true for other religions I do not want to judge here, I leave it to those with more experience.

In any case, what happens in the dialogue between Christianity and Islam on the level of discussions between official representatives of these two religions is empty and useless. It's a dialogue of empty words about irrelevant concepts.

When I attended once a symposium in Berlin, convened in the centre for Japanese and German collaboration by Prof. Ohashi Ryosuke, Prof. Kamada Shigeru put forward a concept of what he called a 'not logos oriented dialogue', i.e. a dialogue based on acting in the spirit of one's religion instead of quarrelling about dogmatic issues.<sup>2</sup> That is, in my opinion, precisely the kind of dialogue which in the end is the only fruitful one; were it to happen it would inevitably lead to a peace among religions. And that we don't have this peace is the proof that this dialogue does not prevail. And how can it prevail as long as

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<sup>1</sup> For text, translation and interpretation cf. the excellent short text in: <https://www.google.com/search?q=Ignatius+vertraue+so+&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b>.

<sup>2</sup> Kamada 2005.

the interfaith dialogue is a dialogue between officials, for whom in their vast majority religion is just a convenient corset of thinking, officials, who do not even know what a life according to religious values means, officials, who - on the contrary - are only a disgrace to the religion they represent.

A meaningful dialogue cannot happen between the representatives of religions who wield power because their actions are contrary to the spirit of the religion they represent. That people who applaud a genocide of Muslims in China like the supreme leader of Iran, that Church leaders who strike secret deals with China and are silent about the destruction of Christianity, the murder and torture of Christians there, wear a cleric's robe - and these are just two particularly eminent examples among many similar people, and there are innumerable other objections against them as well - is a scandal. And yes, let me stress it again: this holds true for most of those who represent the Muslim or Christian faith in public today.

However, there are on all sides many persons who are of truly good will and who strive to turn their words into actions, many ordinary people in our world still live their faith without many words. Thus there is room for a meaningful dialogue, if only among people with no external power or influence. This little booklet is for them - whether they are many or few. It is not for the establishment and least so for the academics and the mainstream 'intellectuals'. Noam Chomsky already called the reaction of western 'intellectuals' to the Kosovo war a caricature of Stalinism.<sup>3</sup> I don't know how to call the worldwide complacency, intellectual dishonesty and utter lack of human decency of 'intellectuals' worldwide today, in whatever country I came - and I came in many - in regard to whatever issue really matters to our lives.

Whoever sees the state of our present world and is honest with himself and dares to be realistic must realise that there was never an epoch in history where more monstrous crimes have been committed before the eyes of the whole world to see, and nobody in power cares - and equally so no one of the academic establishment of pseudo - intellectuals in their rocking chairs. If any time is the darkest in human history, if any time shows that human beings can be monsters it is ours.

I do not know any other word by any eminent person of modern times which sums up our situation in a way that does not throw one into utter despair as fittingly as the famous dictum of Martin Heidegger in his interview in 'Der Spiegel': "only a God can save us". It would need more than such a little

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<sup>3</sup> Günther in: Margagliotta/ Robiglio 2013: 5.

booklet to elaborate on what Heidegger's word means to us if we see it in its context of the history of thought and the present situation of the world.<sup>4</sup> But I hope in what I wrote in these essays makes it shine through in a less ambitious and more 'litteral' way that in these dark times we can only despair of all human efforts, and the only hope that can induce us not to give up on this world is our trust in God.

Still, trust in God cannot mean that we stand ourselves idle. "Trust in God, but tie your camel" (after Hadith 731 from the collection of Sahid ibn Hibban), has become proverbial. However, in view of what I have said above it is crucial to be really conscious of why a dialogue of religions is important today and what we can realistically expect from it. This is so important in particular because the alleged reasons prevailing in today's public discourse are as absurdly wrong as today's politicians on all sides and, in fact, the official representatives of religions are childish, stupid and hypocrite.

Western media propagate the image that religion is the root cause of the violent conflicts in the works today. Even a man like Germany's former chancellor Helmut Schmidt repeatedly uttered the view that a grave responsibility falls on religious leaders in the world today to do all in order to soften religiously motivated violence. To hear this from the mouth of a politician (in this case, to be sure, an intimate friend of Henry Kissinger) is not only cynically ironic, it is the apex of impudence.

That such a view can prevail unchallenged is due, of course, to the western narrative that the murderous, illegal wars of the West since the Iraq intervention of Bush I are wars in which the 'Christian'(- or rather: the Judeo-Christian<sup>5</sup>) occident had to defend itself against an ever more aggressive Islam. Well, if anyone still is ignorant enough not to know that all these wars were fought exclusively for geopolitical reasons I shall not waste my time arguing with him, nor shall I argue with anyone who believes that European societies are even faintly Christian. But it may be worth pointing out that - strangely, or rather obviously enough - the West has identified as its enemies Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Iran, but is on excellent terms with Saudi-Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. And Turkey is still - even if a slightly awkward - member of NATO.

And do I really have to point out that the just mentioned wars are a straight continuation of the policy of regime change pursued by the US since the

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<sup>4</sup> Günther 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Günther 2018b.

end of WWII, a policy which installed brutal dictatorships in 'Christian' countries of Latin America or even - in the case of Greece - in Europe? Is the reckless exploitation of Africa until the present day due to the fact that we are all good Christians and Africans bad Muslims? Is the Israeli - Palestinian conflict due to Israelis being piously devote Jews and the Palestinians devote Muslims or has not Zionism been a secular ideology, originally opposed by a large majority of religious Jews across the board?

And what about the so called Islamist terrorists, ad nauseam put into the limelight by western media? Even apart from the question who created these movements, don't they kill infinitely more Muslims than Christians? And if we look at the Near and Middle East conflict today: today Muslims slaughter Muslims. The foremost killers of Muslims in place are the Saudis, aided by the UAE and of course acting in accordance with the West.

Turkey occupies part of its Muslim neighbour, taking sides in an internal conflict between Muslims, as Turkey does now in Libya as well, with Egypt taking the opposite side. Iran is seen with less than friendly eyes by most Muslims anyhow and now it has - at least in the minds of many, if not most Iraqi people - taken the place of the US even in Iraq. The frontlines are very different from US/ Israel vs. Muslim countries.

And as regards the interior politics: Christians and Jews have - contrary to western media propaganda - hardly any problems in most Muslim countries or at least certainly less than Shiites in some Sunni states.

When it comes to conflicts where religion has its share the situation looks quite different from the familiar dichotomy Muslims vs. Christians: Muslims and Christians are targeted both if religion is targeted by any non Muslim or non Christian regime: this is true for India where indeed a devious chauvinist regime misuses religion in order to target Muslims and Christians, only that the Muslim issue is in the forefront, simply because there are much more Muslims than Christians in India.

It is above all true in China where a degenerate aggressive atheist regime wages war on religion in the name of a particular mixture of radical chauvinism and ideological idiocy (not at all in tune with what Sino-Marxism hitherto stood for), which simply defies belief. Muslims and after them Christians are the main target. China is the largest Auschwitz in the world today (and it's not the only one), it reminds one equally of the Nazis and of Stalin, and à propos: in the SU too Christians and Muslims were targeted both in equal measure.

If one saw this, there would be every reason for Christians and Muslims to unite and fight India and above all China together. However, what happens?

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Christians are silent about the murder and persecution of Christians in China, the Catholic Church even signed a secret (!) deal with China and completely avoids any criticism of China, the media of the Judeo-Christian West are silent - whereas they speak of a persecution of Christians in the Muslim world - a mere invention. Western 'intellectuals' are as happy to be bought by well organised trips to China and are willing to exercise themselves in self censorship as most politicians in cautious diplomacy.

The Muslim world acts even in a more pervert and shameful manner: whereas western countries - and if only for egoism - now ever more denounce religious persecution (of Muslims rather than Christians!) in China (and - contrary to what is often claimed - with some, however small success), Muslim countries are not only silent, a large number of them openly praised China for its genocide of Uyghur people and the destruction of Muslim culture.

Iran - the self declared defender of the oppressed - even prepares a long term deal and has de facto joined the colonies of China already now. Erdogan, the self declared leader of the Muslim world, sends military aid and his terrorist mercenaries to his Turkic brothers in Azerbaijan (today, it seems to me, most Azeris are atheists; before, they were culturally dominated by Persia and Shia Islam) against poor little Armenia, but declares already for some time that Uyghurs in China live happily and caves in to powerful China. Turkish politics has descended into a cheap comedy, aptly represented by my Turkish soccer players giving military salutes before football matches instead of serving as real Turkish men in the Turkish army.

Thus, in view of THIS situation: what is a Muslim - Christian dialogue supposed to yield and who is fit to engage in such a dialogue? At the highest official level it is useless, it can only be the dialogue of the many people of good will of whom there is a considerable number - if only not in the driving seat.

To be sure: these people don't need this dialogue in order to coexist peacefully themselves, they need it and long for it because religion, surely the Abrahamic religions carry in their very essence and history the need of confronting each other and shaping themselves versus the other.

And as religion is not an intellectual pastime but a form of life, truly religious people will carry their understanding of religions with them in their daily life, they will encourage others to equally try to understand the believer in another religion or world view. The addressees of these efforts are not the politicians or the clerics turned into politicians: the addressee is the public, ordinary people, whether religious or secular.

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The aim of religious people will be to break the monopoly of disinformation, the grip of the hypocrite and ill willed establishment over the public and bring ordinary people of different groups together, induce them to accept each other in their diversity in peace and mutual respect. And despite the fact that this is an uphill struggle which seems hopeless in a society ruled by hypocrisy, indifference, selfishness and lies it is worthwhile to commit oneself to this struggle. All my lifelong experience shows me that most ordinary people have a gut feeling for what is right. Despite the ever growing number of brainwashed everyday fanatics - in particular the fanatics of the new religion of secularism - the more people will not shy away from the trouble of engaging in dialogue with the silent majority of ordinary people will make the number of decent and informed people grow, the number of those people who realise that their true desire is to live in peace and harmony with the other in his otherness and thus put this desire before their lower instincts of blind selfishness and complacency to which the establishment of our society appeals over and over again.

I am convinced that people of all religions as well as sceptics or convinced atheists can be an active part of this harmony in diversity. And if any religion is the religion of religious pluralism and inclusiveness this religion is Islam, not the Islam of the 'officials' - as Christianity is not the religion of its officials -, but the Islam of those who understand that Islam is about more than fasting and dress codes, and I know these people are the silent majority of Muslims. To make the silent majority of people of good will of every religion or world view raise their voice, that, nothing more and nothing less, is our real task.

What I have said so far may sound as if interreligious dialogue just means to be nice with everybody. Unfortunately this is not so at all. Surely it is a basic duty of every religious person to be first of all aware of his own shortcomings and human imperfection, to be cautious to leave the ultimate judgement about people as individual persons to God, however, it is our duty too to unmask hypocrisy, oppression and speak out with clear words against opinions we cannot accept in good conscience. What opinions one can or cannot accept everyone must decide for himself according to his own conscience. As far as we talk of people who confess to be religious I personally – and I stress: this is a personal conviction – will neither accept as serious partners in dialogue people who, on the one side, reduce Christianity to absurd demands on sexuality or plainly absurd dogmas on the holy communion, or reduce Islam to dress codes for women and murmuring unconsciously prayer formulars at the right

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time, nor will I accept people who reduce the Ten Commanments to being nice with women and caring for the environment (especially if they host at official events mass murderers like the American ex president Obama) or Muslims who think the Sharia is just a misunderstanding or even propose to ignore a large part of the Quran altogether, as in fact I do not take seriously anybody who thinks he can just pick from the bible or the Quran what he likes and ignore or distort by a deconstructivist interpretation what he dislikes. People who do this are almost as devious as the radical ,secularists' like French politicians who declare the law of the republic superior to the law of God. The latter people are criminals, and it is our duty to denounce them without ambiguity however inconvenient this may be.

Müllheim, November 2020

Hans-Christian Günther



## Religious Truth – What is that?

What do we call religion?<sup>1</sup>

Truth and religion are both problematic terms. Despite important recent research e.g. on the 'religion' of classical antiquity<sup>2</sup> it is still far from being commonly acknowledged how very problematic the term religion is. So I begin with the question – not what is religion, but – what do we call religion and what are some of the problems we should be conscious of in talking of 'religion'.

Religion is a European term, it is derived from Latin *religio* and was taken over also in other European languages, which do not derive directly from Latin, as a loan word. This is due to the fact that Roman Christians took over the word for their religion. However, as applied to pagan Roman cult it referred to something completely different from Christianity. The etymology of the word is not certain, but whatever it is, Cicero's definition<sup>3</sup> of *religio* is perfectly correct as regards pagan religiosity of classical antiquity in general: *religio* denotes the scrupulous observations of the rules of cult. Pagan religion essentially was a mere set of rules how to deal with powers out of human control, powers which however govern human life in a mysterious unintelligible way: this is expressed in the Greek description of the gods as κρείττονες, 'the stronger ones'. This religion was almost bare of any concept, if not that divine powers are both stronger, and thus higher than men and as such inscrutable. They are handled by a set of rules codified by ancient tradition. These rules were basically apotropaic, i.e. an attempt of damage limitation in the face of what is eo ipso uncontrollable. The attitude of the worshipper was fear or respect: in Greek εὐσεβεία, Latin *pietas*. Thus ancient religiosity was characterized essentially by a strict hierarchy: there was an unbridgeable gap: God – man. However, the hierarchy God – man has its pendant in the hierarchical system of both the human and the divine world which is strictly analogous. Ideally both hierarchies point to a single ruler. Now in Latin, in fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Günther 2018a.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Günther 2013a.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero, nat. deorum 2,8.: ... religione, id est cultu deorum--- "Religion, i.e. veneration of the gods"; inv. 2.66: religionem eam, quae in metu et caerimonia deorum sit, appellant "religio they call what is in the fear and the rites of the gods".

*pietas* refers to both: the respect for human superiors and to the gods.<sup>4</sup> In Greek however the verb σέβομαι and the Adjective σεμνός applies in a positive sense to gods only.<sup>5</sup> The character of the divine in ancient pagan religion is the precise opposite to the God of the abrahamic religions. In pagan religiosity God's major attribute is that he is stronger, inscrutable, and thus he is capricious and incalculable, and therefore an object of fear, the worshipper approaches him with caution.

The God who reveals himself in the Jewish – Christian – Islamic tradition is – despite his supreme, even omnipotent power, which is even stronger than that of the pagan gods who are still bound by the laws of fate – he is in his revelation the ultimately trustworthy and reliable, the one who invites man by an act of benevolence towards the latter to trust in him completely and promises the believer, the man who completely trusts in him and follows the path he opens to him, ultimate salvation. This God requests absolute trust and he offers absolute trustworthiness, he offers precisely the absolute reliability we never find in any human being.

Thus if applied to Christian religiosity the pagan *religio* is applied to a completely different attitude towards the divine and thus loses any precise meaning.

Thus it can – provisionally – be applied to any phenomenon holding in any other culture the place, which the abrahamic religions hold in our cultures.<sup>6</sup>

However, we must be very careful not to impose unconsciously concepts of abrahamic religiosity upon other religions.

If we jump for a moment from classical antiquity to our times we still find the attitude of pagan *religio* for example in the Chinese ancestor worship, and let me point out that it is far from true that in modern China most people have no religion: ancestor worship is taken seriously by most ordinary people, certainly by the generation from ca. 45 years onward and in various degrees by younger

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<sup>4</sup> Cicero, inv. 2.66.: pietatem, quae erga patriam aut parentes aut alios sanguine cognatos officium conservare moneat. "Pietas, what admonishes us to fulfill our duty towards the motherland or the parents or others who are our relatives".

<sup>5</sup> Σεμνός applied to gods = venerable, applied to men "a nerd".

<sup>6</sup> Modern Chinese uses for 'religion' a modern Japanese loan word: 宗教 zongjiao, jap. shukyo "teaching", a European concept, neither traditional Chinese nor Japanese religion is a "teaching", thus the Chinese constitution does not call Confucianism or ancestor cult religion, but qualifies ancestor religion as 迷信 mixin "superstition"; religions are characterized by belief, cult, organization, these are Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Daoism, Buddhism (note that Catholicism and Protestantism are two different religions, as in Indonesian law too by the way).

people as well. Many young people are educated to pray before every school or university exam to the ancestors. When I asked once a 24 years old student whose parents commanded her to pray every such time, whether she takes it seriously herself she said – and that is a typical answer: sometimes yes, sometimes not.

In religions like pagan religiosity or Chinese ancestor cult, where worship is related completely to the do-ut-des principle, worship is ultimately just an attempt to damage limitation, it is based and cannot be but based on scepticism. Thus it is the precise opposite of a religion based on faith. To ask whether the Greeks or Romans – or the Chinese for that matter – believed in their gods makes no sense. Faith is characteristic of certain religions.

A religion based merely on a set of acts of worship is not based on any coherent concept.

However, it can be conceptualised by philosophy. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy is rather a religion than philosophy in our sense. But then religion is transformed into a system of thought which is guided by reason. Reason is the yardstick of this religion, only that we must never forget that this reason is in itself a concept of Greek thought, which rests on completely arbitrary, inexplicit axioms, which are never questioned. Other cultures have different ways of thought; these ways are neither rational nor irrational, they are simply different.

Indian thought has great analogies to Greek philosophy and one may thus legitimately speak of Indian philosophy. Given that this is an analogy, not complete identity one may call original Buddhism a philosophy or a philosophical religion from the very start.

In contrast to this: the abrahamic religions – as pagan religion – are *per se* not based on a philosophical concept. Of course, in contrast to the, so to speak, indefinite gods of pagan religiosity the God of the revelation is definite, he is a God who immediately has one defining characteristic: he is the one who reveals himself in a sacred text and thus turns towards man with the benevolence of a father and invites man to follow his path. However, the attitude which genuinely corresponds to this act of revelation is obedience, trust and faith. If such a religion develops a system of thought or is integrated into a system of thought this is – as with pagan religiosity – only a secondary, and I would, add not absolutely necessary step.

Abrahamic religions did develop such systems of thought, and they developed them by shaping themselves versus each other. Moreover, they did this by applying to oneself the system of thought of pagan Greek philosophy,

because this was the way of thought dominating the time and place where and when these religions shaped themselves. This led to an antagonism – in various degrees – between reason and faith, because fundamental tenets of Greek thought were ultimately incompatible with basic characteristics of these religions.

Chinese ancestor worship too was used in the thought of Chinese schools of thought, schools of thought we call Chinese philosophy. However, Chinese thought is so different from western thought that I would prefer not to use this word.

This is particularly obvious if we turn to the use of traditional Chinese religion in Confucius.

Confucius' thought does not know concepts.<sup>7</sup> It is not – as Greek thought – descriptive. It is never about facts. Confucius' thought is, so to speak, completely man-centred. The world is not a fixed set of facts man must know in order to find his place in this world. In Confucius the world is that which takes shape in and by human behavior. The world is not the sum of things or facts, the world is the sum of possibilities of human actions.

Man is ultimately pointed in his behavior towards the good. The thinker is a master who knows to touch the innermost place in man's heart/ mind (心 xin) where he can activate the good which resides in the depth of man's xin, heart, mind. The attitude demanded from the recipient of the master's word is not – as in Greek philosophy – the effort to join into rational reasoning, συμφιλοσοφεῖν “join together in philosophical discussion”, it is reverence towards the master, i.e. opening up one's heart so that the master's word can reach its depths where the ultimate nature of man's being a man, the ultimate good resides.

In this spiritual exercise the place of the cult as a set of rules is this: the corpus of traditional rules of the cult which Confucius demands to study again and again is called 礼 li. Li in its religious sense are the rules of respect towards the divine, or the world of the ghosts, towards the world which inspires immediate respect and fear. Thus the study of li is an exercise that teaches respectful behavior.<sup>8</sup> This respectful behavior becomes a habit and is thus also practiced in the human sphere which is hierarchical, in analogy to the

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<sup>7</sup> See Günther 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Lunyü 3.15: The master enters the grand temple and asked about everything. Someone said: who said the master know all about 礼 (li) “ritual”? He asks about everything. The master heard it and said: this is 礼 (li) “proper behaviour”.