

**‘HEILSBEDÜRFNIS’ AND ‘LEBENSFÜHRUNG’:
REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CHRISTIAN
RELIGION TO AN ETHOS IN SOCIETY**

Jörg Dierken

In the context of discussing relations between (Christian) religion and society, especially focusing on ethical issues, I will open the issue with some short considerations on this topic – entailing more questions than answers. First, let me make some remarks about misunderstandings of the topic. It is a puzzle which cannot be solved using a simple concept, especially not in the sense that we should strengthen piety or religiosity in the consciousness of believers in order to increase morality in the public realm of society. Second, I will comment on Max Weber’s famous thesis on the relation of Protestantism and capitalism. Weber shows that the relation between religion, behaviour and society is very complex. There is no direct impact of religion on the ethical status of society, but rather a subtle dialectic which is linked to historical developments, especially in connection to an increasing rationality and its socio-economic effects. These developments differ extremely from one religion, society or historical situation to another. Third, in accordance with some of Weber’s basic categories, I will focus on a number of characteristic elements of the Christian religion and their impact on questions of ‘Lebensführung’ (conduct of life), which allows for reflections on the role of Christian religion in modern times.

1. Misunderstandings of the contribution of the Christian religion to an ethos of society

It is quite clear that there is a contribution of religion to the ethos of society. This is an important reason in education or politics in some Western countries to foster religion in order to counterbalance problematic developments. In this sense, for instance, parents expect their children to participate in religious education at school or in lessons preparing the confirmation act in Christian congregations – although they themselves often live in significant distance to the Christian faith

or ecclesiastic institutions. When serving as a vicar in a Protestant congregation I observed many times that parents brought their children to church to attend Sunday service (children are expected to participate in the service in order to get admission to the confirmation act), while they themselves preferred to stay in the car instead of attending – although they wanted their children to go to church. One reason for this is that they expected a positive influence of religion on the development of their children, e.g. strengthening their moral values and behaviour, protecting them from alcohol, drugs, violence, red-light districts etc. In a similar way, politicians in our society are asking for religion in order to strengthen morality in the public sphere. There is a very famous saying from a former judge of our supreme court (Böckenförde): “The liberal secular state lives on premises that it cannot itself guarantee.” In this line of thought, religion is held as “unifying band” of the common. The state and important players in the public sphere demand basic standards of moral behaviour from most of the people as well as an inner agreement to the rules of this society, and religion is understood as an important source of that. It is not possible to organize a society by having the police control everybody all the time. This is a classical political argument.

But it is not clear in what respect religion is used and if it is the right candidate for these goals. Certainly, there is an influence of religion on morality, commitment and responsibility in the public – e.g. acting in accordance with what a person says, honesty to others, reliability etc. The background for this might be the creed that God is able to look into the ‘heart’ of the individual’s self as well as into the ‘heart’ of the others. But this must be considered in different contexts. To give an example: It is a well-founded empirical insight that there exist correlations in certain populations between the rate of insurance frauds and the level of piety. Sociology of religion can measure this correlation with respect to different religions and confessions. Protestants are inclined to commit frauds less frequently than Roman Catholics, whereas atheists aren’t so scrupulous in following their own interests against insurance companies. But these facts provoke a paradoxical consequence: Insurance companies should be interested in fostering this confessional kind of piety in order to increase their profits – although this logic of the insurance company is quite similar to that of

fraudulent atheists and its inner tendency to damage the benefits of insurance companies.

Every evaluation of the ethical function of religion has to deal with the problem of different interests, expectations and values which are claimed by different players in this game. This becomes evident in the case of religiously motivated honesty towards or fraud against insurance companies. Knowing this, a shift could take place in the behaviour of pious believers, for example if they became aware of the role of companies and their role in the contemporary financial crisis. To adjudicate upon the ethical contribution of religion to society depends on standpoint and perspective. Similar differences in interests and expectations become evident in the case that one develops a strong or fanatic piety as result of religious education. Not only conversions to militant forms of religiosity are proof for this, but also the case that children refuse to follow the career their parents have laid out for them, e.g. with respect to the family's heritage. The son or daughter prefers working for a NGO without high salary, whereas the parents expect them to continue their business company. Different perspectives and expectations are one reason for confusing the evaluation of religious contributions to ethics in the sphere of the general public – according to the hybrid character of religion, being inner and private faith or conviction, on the one hand, and evoking actions in the outer realm with consequences to others, on the other.

Another reason for confusion about the relation of religion and ethos in society is the paradox that considerations on the ethical function of religion often differ from the self-understanding of the believers regarding their own motivations. For themselves, they aren't religious for the sake of improving benefits of companies or strengthening the public order in order to minimize the costs for security. They are convinced by their faith – though the faith may be accompanied by doubts and sceptical reflections on various topics. Being convinced implies a practical dimension: There is no division between the mind and the heart.

Religion is not only a system of doctrines in the consciousness of the believers. It is rather a 'form of life as a whole' ('Lebensform im Ganzen', Habermas). Therefore, religious faith has consequences on the behaviour of the believers, and they act in the sphere shared by others.

Usually, believers are not convinced by a religious outlook of the world because it is grounded on well-thought insights with the potential to reject contradictory thoughts and arguments. Therefore, religion is not a set of theoretical concepts about man, world and God. Religion entails views and thoughts about these, but it is more than this: It is a kind of orientation about life in the world, corresponding to our understanding of ourselves in the framework of an assumed order of the world as it is and as it ought to be – an order, which includes our own individuality as well as the structure of the whole. This orientation is *growing on the basis of experience*, not of argumentation. Certainly, experience is embedded in the relations of social life. In that way, the others come into play for forming orientation. Needless to say that experience asks for understanding and interpretation – also with respect to the convictions of others which one has to take into account. This is the place for the development of religious discourses, thoughts and insights, which may lead to complex doctrinal systems with practical relevance. But even they are understood as contents of what we are convinced of, including our orientation towards acting. Insofar our convictions are already preformed; religion cannot be separated from our praxis. And this is linked to our lives in the world. Religion is connected with acting. This applies to basic assumptions in our daily lives in well-known constellations as well as to complex normative puzzles arising from confusing questions against the background of contemporary challenges. This is why we are able to assess contributions of (Christian) religion to an ethos of society.

But this also leads us to at least two basic questions: What are the sources of religious convictions? If they are related to practice in society, then we can assume that there is a mutual relation between society and religion. The other question arises from historical developments from which very different constellations between Christianity and the public have emerged. There is no fixed contribution of Christian religion to the ethos across different times. *This becomes evident if one takes a look at the period from the Middle Ages to modernity.* Let us reflect about this with a glance at Max Weber.

2. Max Weber on religion, society and modern developments

Weber's basic methodological insight is not to ask whether or not religion is true. Rather, Weber focuses on religion as an elementary mode of subjective meaning or sense ('Sinn') which manifests itself in actions of the believers in the realm of inter-subjectivity. Subjective meaning/sense corresponds to conduct of life (*Lebensführung*). Sociology of religion does not attempt to create such subjective sense. This is no job for any theory. Rather, it arises in contingent historical constellations, spontaneous and, from the perspective of sociological research, in an irrational manner. Therefore, it is out of the question that scientific theory of religion makes an approach to influence someone by using religious ideas in order to push him or her towards a certain attitude. Theory of religion is not politics using religion. Rather, it entails the insight that religion is a part of culture with its own principles, and only on the basis of this, it is an important factor in the social sphere, especially regarding economy.

Although religion arises in the contingencies of history, it is not an arbitrary factor of human life. Otherwise we could not understand the very importance of religion for the individual and social life. Religion is dealing with questions of enhancement of human life in the face of restriction and danger. For Weber, religion is connected with self-preservation. Magic e.g. attempts to influence the netherworld in order to strengthen the chances in this life. Basically, ambitions to self-deification are elements of all religions. In this line of thought we can also understand human tendencies to participate in the divine, even if they focus on passivity and non-acting or mystical sublation of the finite self into the infinite. These religious forms are expected to be able to balance disappointments in this life. Religion has to do with interests and needs for salvation (*Erlösungsbedürfnis*), and deification or participating in the divine are modes of salvation.

More intricate are forms of religion, which focus on a super-natural God, inconceivable for man, as well as claiming man's attention and devotion – in an extreme case even in contrast to man's immediate interests. We find such arbitrariness in the imagination of God in Judaism and Christianity. Peculiarly, this is the basic form which leads to occidental rationalism, the main topic of Weber's sociology of religion.

Against the background of this God one can see that the need for salvation very soon shifts to the question of theodicy. God does not fulfil what the believers expect him to do. This is not the end of God. Rather, God is good for developing a fruitful tension between him and the opposite theodicy-problem. This tension of both, need for salvation by God, on the one hand, and its disappointment by the problem of theodicy, on the other, provokes a striving to smooth out the tension by unifying both factors. This is the religious source of rationality. Rationality means a unity of the different by rational relations. Bringing rationality is the cultural achievement of religion. Rationality, by restraining the irrational, is the very basic character of religion. This corresponds to subjective meaning or sense as form of religion.

In the Jewish tradition we can observe this emergence of rationality, insofar as the prophets conceptualize an understanding of history as a whole, realized by God using the power of ancient kingdoms according to Israel's sins and failures. This rationality entails dimensions of the counterfactual and normative. It arises from the explanation of the reason for the bad state of affairs. History was constructed in the view of God and his judgement, with regard only to Israel's religious and moral attitudes. Israel and its behaviour becomes the centre of the world, and this construction demands a constructive interpretation of the counterfactual elements of the view of history. This implies a certain rationality, entailing normative elements. The prophetic world view interprets the whole in order to allow a consistent understanding (judgement) as the basis for acting.

"Rationalizing" as a characteristic of religion is not limited to Western religions. Also Eastern religious ideas about the cause of suffering and pain correspond, according to Weber, to the need for salvation, and the theistic problem of theodicy has an equivalent in the search for ways out of the realm of endless suffering. But these basic strategies, e.g. the anti-strategy of negating all intentional doing, are rather different from the Western ways. This is one reason for Weber to focus on the development of rationality towards modern capitalism – his academic question – especially with respect to the contingent history of Western religious forms.

This leads us to Weber's famous theory on the relation between Protestantism and capitalism. This theory is well known, so I abstain

from repeating it. Although this theory has been criticized for various reasons, we can gain important insights into the logic of capitalism and a religious rationality which is dealing with the irrational traits of an absolute God whom one cannot call to account. The point of this theory is not to explain a human character, formed by Christian values with respect to attributes like honesty and virtue, combined with industriousness and modesty. Rather, an irrational aspect of the capitalistic rationality has to be explained: I mean acquisition (*Erwerb*) only for the sake of acquisition. Acquisition, in that sense, is not pursued in order to make consumption possible or to allow for a better life. Greed is as old as mankind, and ravenousness is not a specific feature of capitalism. Capitalism in its rise was accompanied by asceticism, and this specific asceticism has to be elucidated. It is irrational because it does not focus on the needs and interests of its agents, though they act rationally in the realm of economy and proceed precisely calculating. Weber basically attempts to understand this very paradox in the logic of capitalism in relation to the paradox of the irrational traits of the absolute God in his double predetermination of salvation and damnation, on the one hand, and the rationality in pious understanding, on the other hand. This rationality leads to the most active asceticism. Insofar as attempts to influence the Absolute are no available option to believers who believe in the power of predetermined ultimate grace or ultimate perdition, they have to look for indirect indications of their own status. And at the top of this indirectness they can try to strengthen positive indications such as economic success which cannot be perceived to be in conflict with divine grace because this is the source of all goods. Nevertheless, the human agents can concentrate their attention on strategies to force an increase of their income. These strategies foster asceticism because enjoying one's income, consuming it would damage the interest of accumulating it.

For Weber, there is no doubt that this logic comes to an end through the developments of modern capitalism. His picture of modern capitalism is very dark. The modern striving to earn for the sake of earning resembles "agonal passions", and the development of culture leads towards a type of man Weber characterizes as follows: "Fachmenschen ohne Geist, Genußmenschen ohne Herz/professionals without spirit, men of pleasure without heart". This is, of course, a dark and poetic

formula, probably created by Nietzsche. Against this background, Weber cannot be taken as blueprint for present-day Christian ethics and their effects on society. But Weber can draw our attention to a point we have to take into account during all considerations concerning the contributions of Christian ethics to society.

3. The dignity of subjectivity in social processes

One of the most elementary categories of Weber's sociology of religion is 'Lebensführung' – conduct of life. This presupposes a subject which is able to act spontaneously in any way. To avoid misunderstandings, 'subjectivity' does not mean a given substance or a real entity beyond society. There is no subject without social relations. Subjectivity is a knot of different social relations, but these relations are arranged by acting autonomously. Even spontaneity can become manifest only in social contexts. Spontaneity means that one is the author of one's own acts, or, in other words, that the acts are not merely reactions to the pushes of others. If this was the case, nobody would be able to 'conduct' (lead) his life. One can demonstrate the relation of subjective spontaneity and social context by pointing to the phenomenon of negation: If one denies what others are pushing one to do, then one's 'No' to the others' aims cannot be caused by them in the same manner as their attempts to make one do what they want one to do. This 'No' is a placeholder for spontaneity which is the heart of subjective freedom. Without subjective freedom neither would self-preservation be possible, nor could we understand the will of a person. Personality would be reduced to fulfilment of a certain function like in societies of bees or ants.

To be sure, the spontaneous state of subjectivity is in no way a product of Christianity. Subjective freedom is not a result of religion – neither is the character of human will. But religion and culture can cultivate these basic phenomena of humanity. And they can make a contribution to the public ethos by doing so. In this sense, Christian religion can contribute to an ethos which respects the dignity of subjectivity. This has a reverse effect in cultivating subjective responsibility – as well as to form the person's will in the light of what ought to be done. Especially the categories of the counterfactual and the normative

can be held in remembrance by Christianity. Certainly, this has to happen in accordance with an individual's own insight. But it is clear, too, that this insight has to take into account that one's own insight can be wrong. It must be open to correction – analogous to the phenomenon of 'No'. The 'No' does not only yield to others, rather it regards also the subject's self if it becomes rightly aware of the fact that it isn't without failure.

Weber's category 'Lebensführung' leads us not only to keywords of ethics like freedom and responsibility, will and ought etc. Furthermore, it opens up our minds to paradoxical constellations arising in relations of the individual and the social and asking for some specific kinds of asceticism. On the one hand, subjective will is arising spontaneously and irrationally, and Christian ethics underline that man should have a will for something. On the other hand, opposite to its unconditioned spontaneity every will is directed to its certain object, and this will's acts are embedded in the common reality which is also the place of acts of others. Further, no acts of this will have brought this will into existence. Subjectivity and will are characterized by the very dimension of infinity, but also by finitude. And this paradox has to be taken into account by one's own self: It cannot overcome all elements of negation; rather, it has to deal with them in a productive manner.

This can be understood as a rational concept of asceticism. And this can be grasped as inner-worldly performance of mystical redemption. Its place is the multiplicity of personal and social relations in the fields of privacy and family as well as in the public sphere between economy and politics. To explain this in more detail, one must unfold the shapes of social institutions. I cannot do this here. But I can point out the very basic idea of this concept: It is the mutuality of freedom and equality. The freedom of one individual is no other freedom than that of the other, but this equal freedom is the freedom of the one as well as the freedom of the other. This is the reason why social relations, although based on the very idea of reciprocity, cannot be explained once and for all. When explaining one relation, it will be in asymmetry to another, and this, in turn, calls for a balance by another asymmetry. One case of asymmetry is the symbolic explication of these topics as it is performed in symbolic religious communication, when it is aware of the fact that

we can explain the infinite only by using finite imaginations and pictures, entailing potentials for their own correction.

To come to the end of my paper, I will indicate a topic for discussion. It is no secret that most of my ideas are drawn from traditions of liberal Christianity, which is rooted in the Enlightenment. Traditionally, these ideas have been located in Western societies. Nowadays, we see a growth of Christianity not in Western countries, but in China and other Far Eastern countries, especially South Korea. I would like to discuss whether or not this Western type of Christianity is compatible with the challenges of these societies. In other parts of the world, e. g. in Africa and in Latin America, we can find a *Pentecostal piety* with a focus on subjective behaviour. It does not, however, strengthen critical attitudes or put the emphasis on 'No', at least in order to optimize economic success of the individuals. This is also a form of 'Lebensführung'. But it implies a transformation of Christian religion as it is rooted in the liberal traditions of enlightenment. That leads me to the question: Is Christianity in China understood to be a vehicle to communicate ideas of Western liberal traditions to modernity and capitalism – or is it a phenomenon of another kind of modernity which overcomes those roots? Probably, this is a wrong question – but why?