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The discussion about the Holy
in an anthropological perspective

By

Wolfgang Gantke

1. Formulation of the question

The majority of today's scholars of Science of Religion start from the premise that their discipline must not exceed the limits of empirical research. Scholars of Study of Religion therefore gladly evade those great philosophical questions that cannot be answered without ambiguity. Moreover, they normally do not even pose the difficult but rather important question about man and his position in the cosmos.

As a result, the relation between Study of Religion and Philosophical Anthropology remains unexplained. Nevertheless, both branches of Study of Religion – the rather historical and the social-scientific – premise an image of man, which has to be clarified in a modified intercultural context.

In this article, I am trying to show, that Study of Religion, considering the contemporary encounter of cultures, even of different scientific cultures, is no longer able to afford not to pose the fundamental question about its always-presupposed image of man. The traditional discussion in Science of Religion about the Holy did not pay that much attention to the question “What is man?” as it deserves.

I am of the opinion that any input into the discussion about the Holy that either ignores the question about man or absolutizes a certain image of man does not meet the contemporary pluralistic requirements. From the outset, the discussion should consider today's variety of answers to the question about man.

In doing so, Study of Religion should consider a basic difference, which is important for the discussion about the Holy. This difference can be phrased as the question: Can man only be explained as an intrawordly, naturalistic being or is he open to transcendence?

It depends on the answer to this question whether a meaningful discourse within Science of Religion about the Holy still is possible or whether an enlightened Study of Religion can only be performed meaningfully without openness to transcendence.

The discourse about the Holy disregard this interlacement of the religious and the anthropological question, presumably due to the anti-theological and anti-philosophical basic attitude of many scholars of Science of Religion. Hence, within an extended intercultural context it is necessary to rethink the anthropological requirements of religious research enabling to accept scientifically the deep encounter of man with the Holy.

2. About the meaning of the anthropological “principal of the open question”

The “principle of the open question”, which is open to plurality, prevents from hasty attempts, profane or religious, to determine a certain image of man, and enables to consider an image of man that is open to transcendence.

At a time characterized increasingly by worldwide migration movements, in which contradictory profane and religious conceptions of man occasionally collide to each other, to me, the “principle of the open question”, emphasizing the priority of disturbing questions to soothing answers, seems to be a suitable approach to the new challenges.

This principle allows an open, holistic perspective of man without hasty claims of exclusivity.

Heading for a nowadays necessary, preferably universal anthropology, we have to overcome Eurocentric barriers of understanding. A one-dimensional secular and anthropocentric perspective has established them. At this place, a clear distinction has to be drawn between an anthropological perspective open to transcendence that does not absolutize the immanence of human nature, and an egoistic anthropocentrism focusing only on man.

It nowadays becomes evident that, especially regarding the ecological crisis, an interculturally open Science of Religion cannot be based on the assumption of an humanegoistic anthropocentrism. The altered context shows that the traditional attempts of pre-modern cultures trying to answer the question about man and his relation to the Holy deserve to be acknowledged. Already Mircea Eliade has called for such a kind of new humanism based on the religious traditions of mankind.

The different cultures of mankind, even the non-uniform academic cultures, may be interpreted as a projected anthropology, once again emphasizing the importance of a pluralistic future-oriented anthropological perspective open to transcendence.

However, an anthropological perspective open to the fullness of religious manifestations is only possible to the religious scholar by avoiding an image of man one-dimensionally focused on culture that is not open to foreign ideas of mankind.

Not being committed to a distinct answer allows the openness to new, foreign and unexpected experiences and hence to answers that have not been given yet in the history of religion. Because the preconception is not finalized, it remains an open question, what man is like and what might become of him. This naturally extends to the diverging human conceptions of the Holy.

The history of the conceptions of the Holy does not end at a certain point. It goes on, and time-referenced reinterpretations based on new and foreign experiences might not only be allowed, but sometimes even seem to be necessary.

Considering the increasing political and religious crisis-situation, it again is the “principle of the open question” that reveals itself as a sustainable proposal for solution. This is, because it is not committed to a unique, absolutized image of man and of the Holy, but allows a dedicated Science of Religion to be oriented towards the noblest and most precious ideals and role models from different traditions. The ideal of an “integral humanism” based on a “universal anthropology” benefits from this openness. This “universal anthropology” does not exist yet and presumably will never come into existence. Nevertheless, within the

scope of an intercultural Science of religion open to plurality, it is possible to come close to this ideal. To my opinion, the significance of a sustainable, engaged Study of Religion resides in the possibility to be guided by the culture-transcending ideal of a united mankind, even though it is not possible to reach but only to come close to this ideal.

Like hardly any other science, an ideal, future-oriented Science of Religion would be forced to discuss in a problem-oriented way the various attempts of people from different cultures to answer the fundamental questions of religion. These are the questions about good and evil, freedom and fate, order and chaos, life and death, immanence and transcendence, all of them leading to the question about man and his place in universe.

To my opinion, these always-disturbing questions seem to be religious questions, which science cannot answer unambiguously. However, a concerned Study of Religion should reflect upon the importance of these questions for a succeeding human life in a scientifically disciplined way.

This is also true for the knowledge worth possessing of the different attempts to answer the question about man's relation to the Holy.

Even traditional attempts to answer the question about the Holy are not definitely obsolete, if the overhasty absolutization of modern attempted explanations (e.g. naturalistic or constructivist) is eschewed.

Anyway, an anti-fundamentalist and, because it antagonizes the wish for closed systems, anti-constructivist approach inheres in the "principle of the open question". Furthermore, it allows rejecting today's widespread determination on a methodical naturalism, which is based on a conception of man focused on the here and now. Hence, it promotes "ideological naturalism" and therefore is by no means as confession-neutral, as it claims to be.

Because the "principle of the open question" allows openness to transcendence, it enables to relativize the "methodical atheism", the relative validity of which is by no means denied. Only the absolutization of finite partial-truths about man and the entirety of his not in advance determinable possibilities of experience is denied.

An integral anthropology will try to accept methodically the empirical worlds of foreign cultures, which on the first glance seem to be irrational. In doing so, a preconception of man open to transcendence can only be helpful. Of course, this basic "openness to transcendence" must not be consolidated to a certain, unalterable positing of transcendence in the sense of substance metaphysics or essentialism,

Not being determined on certain religious answers and confessions differentiates an intercultural Science of Religion from the different theologies of the religions. In accordance with certain contexts of tradition, they normally have to give unambiguous answers on the anthropologic and the correlative religious question.

In the sense of an "anthropological reduction", Science of Religion in contrast to the theologies of religion can only lead up to that point, where a human being

open to transcendence experiences the secret of the encounter with an unfathomable and inaccessible depth dimension of truth, which within this article I define as the intercultural generalizable Holy. The anthropological “principle of the open question” is of importance to the discussion of Science of Religion about the Holy, because it quasi is the condition to enable the recognition of the non-objectifiable Holy in human beings and the world. Based on the anthropological perspective, it can be meaningful beyond theology to speak of the Holy and of man being touched existentially by the Holy.

The principle of the open question brings to mind that it can make sense to the academic Science of Religion to perceive and accept such questions that empirical research cannot answer unambiguously. A “problem-oriented phenomenology of religion”, equally directed against a profane or a religious reduction of complexity greatly endeavors to keep open the question about the Holy in the academic Science of Religion.

Both endanger this openness, a prematurely absolutized reductionism on the sacred as well as the absolutization of one-dimensional, intramundane attempts to explain religious experiences.

By attempting to once for all objectify or fix the Holy, it becomes to an idol, a mere work of man. In this case, criticism of religion, both naturalistic and constructivist, becomes relatively valid.

3. The two faces of the Holy

The idol-skeptical will to doubt contributes to overcome today’s mystery-forgottenness, because it reveals the finite occupations of the infinite, thus hampering the absolutization of partial truths about the unfathomable wholeness and counteracting the fundamentalist temptation. Fundamentalist interpretations of the Holy exist in all religions, the violent potential of which currently becomes evident. However, it does not change the fact that in this threatening situation of a regrettably perpetuating clash of cultures an engaged Science of Religion should strongly emphasize the peace-promoting and tolerance-enabling potential existing in all religions. Based on its intercultural competence, Science of Religion is able to make an important contribution to peace-, conflict- and tolerance-research. Thus, it helps to relativize the dark side of the Holy, which recently has been overemphasized. After all, there is the ideal of a religion-based world-conscience, already postulated by Rudolf Otto, Albert Schweitzer and Gustav Mensching. In order to ensure a successful future, it is necessary to take up this ideal.

Following Schmidt-Leukels idea of a “God without limits”, would it not be possible to talk about a “Holy without limits”? In addition, would it not be possible, that a “cosmic humanism” based on the Holy lead to an integral anthropology, yet unfulfilled but in future essential for survival? Could such an integral anthropology become the basis of a religious humanism taking its ideas and gen-

eral principles from the best, most precious and noblest of what the big world religions of mankind can offer?

The without any doubt justified argument of the critics of religion, saying that religions should not be glorified and their dark side should not be ignored, does not contradict the idea of an intercultural oriented religious humanism, being oriented towards the great spiritual master of mankind and their path breaking ideas.

It is the conviction of many spiritual masters, dealing not only with the mental framework of their own tradition, but being familiar with several traditions and being oriented towards a practiced humanism, that a God without limits is able to understand the prayers said in the different languages of various cultures. Because it is of little value invoking the Holy without trying to realize it in one's own life, to my mind, this kind of "engaged humanism" seems to be a suitable cross-cultural criterion of truth for a religion-based humanism even for non-religious people. The idea of an interculturally acceptable "humanist religion" (Erich Fromm) is worth being supported, especially when it has to be admitted that under the given inhuman circumstances of life and work its realization is extremely difficult.

Because of its attempts to console people by referring to the afterlife, an intrawordly instrumentalized and abused religion today is hold responsible for the sad conditions on earth. In the contemporary discussion about religion, the fronts have hardened that much, that religion is regarded as either a curse or a blessing for mankind. In this struggle about religion, having a dualistic character, it is hardly taken into account, that religion as well as the widely secularized modernity is two-faced. Today, the inevitable dialogue between religion and modernity should not focus on playing off both sides against each other. Rather it is imperative to promote all these things on both sides reinforcing a "practiced humanism" and thereby a knowledge of world-preservation.

4. Prospect

In the preceding paragraphs, I have tried to show how much the religious and the anthropological question are connected and how important it nowadays is to an interculturally open Science of Religion to reflect upon its anthropological foundations. Study of Religion certainly cannot be pursued in an empty space without reference to certain anthropological premises.

However, these anthropological premises of Science of Religion mostly remain unexplained. Because of the altered historical situation with its clash of different images of man and the world, today it is a challenge to Study of Religion to rethink the questionable position of the role of mankind in cosmos.

Thematizing the basic question about mankind, Study of Religion is no longer allowed to restrict itself on research question that can be answered empirically.

The mode of speaking and approach, based on a certain image of man and operating monologic-constructively, has to be replaced by a dialogic-open perspec-

tive. This perspective takes the plurality of various images of man as a starting point and incorporates inspiration from different profane and religious traditions, in order to reach an if possible generalizable anthropology in the sense of a practiced humanity, which is not bound on cultural and religious borders. Since certain Eurocentric restrictions of perspective, based on the tendency to absolutize immanence, can be overcome, the seemingly obsolete discussion of Science of Religion about the Holy gains a new openness. Considering the new intercultural and interreligious challenges, requiring a wider scope of plurality- and dialog-ability by both, religious and non-religious people, it seems to me, that this anthropologically well-justifiable openness is a necessary asset to the range of perspectives of Science of Religion. A Study of Religion, trying to ignore the disturbing phenomenon of the Holy, remains behind its today required possibilities of enlightenment and the necessary endeavor for intercultural understanding. The anthropological “principle of the open question” can be the first step on the difficult path to a better intercultural communication competence. Communication is and shall remain the sphere of a super-cultural truth, may it be explained profanely or religiously. An engaged Science of Religion might possibly be able to make a small contribution to this border-crossing approach to this truth.