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Normativity and Context in Sociological Perspective

What brings practical theologians to ask a sociologist for the introduction to the subject of „Normativity and Context in Practical Theology"? What can theology learn from sociology, a science which stems from the tradition of enlightenment and the reactions to it, a science which obviously argues „etsi Deus non daretur"? Sociologists are said to have a wicked view of society and thus also of religion. Aren't they the moles of faith and trust which undermine the sense of obligation and thus the true foundations of what practical theology relies upon to legitimize its claim to normativity? Indeed, sociology is the science of what is self-evident among people, and it questions this evidence by „improper" comparisons and by uncovering the latent functions of beliefs and norms. Sociologists, at least in the European tradition, are fools who try to make things always more complicated than they are. I have to apologize to Americans and other pragmatists for my troublesomeness and insistence *that things are not as they are*, but that they are always socially defined, may it be by practical theologians or by sociologists or by anybody else.

There is an old tradition of sociological critique of religion, but I do not want to bore you with historical retrospect. I do not doubt that protestant theology following Schleiermacher has been able to plead its cause with intellectual integrity, also in the light of a critique of religion; and even the Catholic church has again joined the arena of current debates since the Council of Vatican II. Moreover, sociology has been forced to abstain from arrogance by which it deemed to relegate religion into the prehistory of modernity from Auguste Comte and Karl Marx to Max Weber. The critique of ideology which was an early instrument of sociology to impose its superiority over other forms of knowledge has finally been also directed toward sociology itself, following Karl Mannheims general questioning of the ideological character of human thinking. *From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge today there is no thinking without presuppositions rooted in a social and cultural context and its basic beliefs.* There is no cognition which can establish its own validity except by circular arguments. And this is also the position of the actual philosophy of science. The postmodern way of thinking renounces the claim that a homogeneous form of rationality may lead to reasonable conclusions. Reasonable thought is unable to grasp the totality of being. Reason manifests itself

as „transversal reason" (W. Welsch) by combining different rationalities and intellectual perspectives with respect to a localised frame of reference.[1] The background to this shift from modern rationalism to post-modern pluralism is of course a further development of what in the last thirty years has commonly been refered to as a process of modernization.

There is now a broad consensus among western sociologists that a dominant feature of modernization – i.e. the far-rearching transformation of societies whose paradigm has been the European link of enlightment, industrialisation and democratisation – is the substitution of hierarchical differentation and integration of society by a 'horizontal' differentiation around specific functions. The dominant social structuration is no larger distinguished by similarities and differences in individual status, but rather by differences of economic, political, juridical, religious, scientific, familial, etc., functions. Economy, polity, law, religion, science, and the family have developed specific forms of communication and find their identity by different 'logics' which are formulated by appropriate sciences. There are *uncontested areas* within the realm of these institutions and they shape the many processes of everyday life we take for granted.

But there are also *contested areas:* the issues of our public and semi-public debates, for example, on ecology, on social justice, on the status of immigrants in society, on peace and on the limits of human life. These are areas in which interpretation is contested by the different logics of functional subsystems. *It is precisely the clash between the underlying beliefs and methods of these logics which make the facts of life concerned to be perceived as public problems.* And there is no ultimate authority which can solve the conflicts we are involved in. It is only by patient debate and continual effort as well as by incremental changes of practice that complex modern societies seem to find gradual improvements to such problems.

It is in this post-modern context that the religious perspective which had been relegated to the inferior status of irrational thought and practice by the dominant rationalistic paradigm has regained respect and a place in society. *But religion is no more, as in premodern times,*

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[1] For discussion of what constitutes post-modern society and thinking, see Wolfgang *Welsch:* Unsere postmoderne Moderne. Weinheim: VH 1988[2]; Jean *Ladrière*: Le panorama de l'Europe du point de vue de la philosophie des sciences de l'esprit - un terrain difficile pour la théologie. In: Association Européenne des théologiens catholiques: *La Novelle Europe - Défi à l'Église et á la théologie.* Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1994, 45-65. (German translation in: P. Hünermann (Hg.) Das neue Europa - Herausforderungen für Theologie und Kirche. QD 144, Freiburg i.Br. 1993, 42-62.)

the overarching highest authority. It represents rather a particular perspective among others. Following Auguste Comte, theology had been dethroned by philosophy as the queen of sciences, and in the period which he proclaimed to be the 'positive age', sociology would dethrone philosophy. But there is no longer a queen of sciences. Every science finds itself in the good or bad company of other sciences, and trials to establish superiority amount to nothing more than the idiosyncrasy and vanity of some scientists. The validity of saying „philosophia ancilla theologiae", and its expressed principle of dominant and auxiliary science have long been rendered obsolete. *The dominant pattern is now debate among sciences of equal standing but with specific values, presuppositions and foundations which are rather heterognenous and rooted in beliefs that can neither be proven nor refuted by either.* Thus philosophical or sociological critique of religion will never sap its foundations nor will theology or even ecclesiastical authority be able to supersede the concurrent interpretations. The quest for truth, should it still exist, or at least the quest for reasonable consensus with respect to contested issues is now bound to specific conditions of interdisciplinary communication, and it is in this connection that the subject of „Normativity and Context" is systematically embedded.

Words have no unequivocal meaning, and perhaps we all associate different meanings with these key words of our conference. Therefore I will try as a first step to develop a sociological interpretation of the two concepts which is complex enough that you may recognize your own problems in that context. In a second step I refer to a basic problem of established contemporary religion, i.e. the endangered continuity of Christian tradition in the context of modern society. Here the framework of normativity and context proves to be helpful to structure the problem. And finally I will suggest *some consequences* following from the contemplation of historical and social contexts within practical theology.

1. Conceptual issues

'Normativity' is a term for which in many dictionaries of common and professional language I have searched in vain. It is a very abstract idea, even more abstract than that indicated by the term 'norm' which today is used as a basic concept in sociology. The author of the respective article in the 1968 edition of the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences points out that the 1930 edition did not include the term 'norm'. This documents its recent usage. 'Norm', especially in the sense of social norms has become a generalized and inclusive term

for the more specific terms of 'custom', 'folkways', 'mores' and 'law'. *The term 'normativity' then designates the specific property of norms,* i.e. that which makes patterns, rules and standards valid or obligatory. The mode of existence of norms may be called validity (Geltung). A norm is valid inasmuch as it displays an obligatory character at least in a specific context and under specific conditions. A norm is a generalized standard or rule, a social norm a generalized standard or rule for social conduct.

My screening of dictionaries showed a characteristic difference in the interpretation of norms between the German and the Anglo-Saxon culture. Whereas in the German (and I assume also in other continental) traditions the specific mode of validity, the *sense of obligation,* is emphasized, the behavioristic and utilitarian tradition of especially the American culture uses the term mainly in a *descriptive sense* to describe for instance patterns of behavior. One distinguishes there sharply between norms and values, whereas the continental European tradition tends to see their difference only in the level of generality. The normativity of norms is thus interpreted in the American context as stemming from somewhat outside the norms, e.g. strong feelings of a group or a belief-system, whereas the European tradition is emphasizing more the coherence of norms, groups and values as a systemic property of obligation. I think that this difference has to do with the stronger impact of longstanding traditions in European culture and the reminiscence of coherent cultural and social perspectives which could never develop in the individualistic and voluntaristic American culture.

Disregarding these differences of emphasis we should keep in mind the following distinction: *The normativity of a norm or of a system of norms concerns the character of its sense of obligation and has to be distinguished from its context of validity.* The sense of obligation is always rooted in a kind of belief. This belief can refer, e.g. to tradition, to expediency, to authority, to the legitimacy of a political order, or to specific values. All these reflect common understandings. One has, however, to add a specific modern pattern: the sense of obligation may stem from the mere fact that an individual has given his or her assent to obey a certain norm. The basic belief concerns here the identity of the self. One should not underestimate the binding character of this self-obligation in a highly individualized culture. The identity of the self has become for many a kind of ultimate value in guiding their life. This shall be eloborated later.

Not even in traditional societies did all norms apply to everybody. It was the status of a person who determined which norms he or she

had to follow. And of course there was a high variability of norms between different cultural settings. In modern societies the context of validity normally refers to certain realms of functional differentiation: one has to obey his parents, but only in the realm of family, not in that of business or politics. There remain, of course, some rather general norms of personal conduct which apply to different functional contexts (e.g. „you shall not steal"), but *the bulk of norms refer and get their sense only in a specified functional context.*

This statement may sound provocative for propagators of ethics and morals. There has indeed been a strong movement during the last centuries to establish the universal validity of certain norms, either by reference to the commandments of God, to the teachings of a church, to natural law, or to human rights. But it seems that it is precisely this universal validity which is actually questioned not only with reference to specific norms but with reference to the validity of norms themselves. *Universal validity means that a norm is considered to be an obligatory standard with respect to every context, that it obliges without qualification. This presumption has been meeting growing criticims from different points of view.*

The first concerns the cultural clash which results from the growing mobility of people and information throughout the world, or more generally from the growing interdepencence of an emerging international society. Western culture which is imbued by the values of Mediterranean antiquity, the Christian creed and the ideas of the enlightenment is confronted by limits— or borders so to speak— of acceptance. Thus it has proven itself to be less universal than its claim. Take the claim for human rights: is it an expression of Western imperialism or the normative basis of world integration? I shall not pursue this issue here though it will be of paramount importance in the century to come.

Rather I shall focus on another aspect of the problem which is intimately linked to post-modernity, the point of departure to this inquiry.

A constituent trait of post-modern consciousness is a sense of the overcomplexity of the world. Whereas the modern consciousness shared the hopes of enlightenment that human reason would eventually be able to understand and manipulate the world in the interest of humanity, post-modern thinkers like Jean François Lyotard, denounce „la fin des grands récits". Here Lyotard is referring to the end of the great interpretations which aimed at an integrated view of the world and the self, which gave sense to history and offered moral justification to social movements. The unexpected consequences of technical progress and the perverse effects of well-meant political actions have shaped the sense for the limitations of our knowledge and for restric-

tions in righteous actions. Although our knowledge is growing at an even faster pace we become aware that this does not converge into a coherent frame of reference but diverges into a muliplicity of differentiated frames of reference of high but limited and sometimes ambivalent plausibility. The multidimensionality of our knowledge, as it is represented e.g. in the multiple perspectives of the different sciences, transforms deeply our cognition of reality and of normativity as well. *Basic to common understanding is not that things are as they are but that they change under the different light of various perspectives in which one can consider them.* This is of course a strong challenge to every form of tradition and our intellectual orientations toward the world. But it is difficult to contest the fact that we have lost a common understanding of what are the basic things in life. There is no more a common certainty in what we take for granted.

To be sure, if one wants to take action one has to ignore this diversity of meaning and choose a single frame of reference. An action frame of reference is, however, normally not congruent with a unique scientific perspective. It refers rather to experience with specific situations which are defined as similar to the situation at hand. *Actions are bond to space and time, they are local and particular, not universal. Their success depends upon synthetic not upon analytic judgments.* Any definition of a situation and any action frame of reference are a blend of cognitive and normative judgments. Especially decisions with far-reaching consequences need a complex definition of the situation. They exhibit a high cognitive complexity which also refers to various normative standards.[2]

Turning to our second basic term *context*, one has first to acknowledge that it is a very general and elusive term. Its original meaning denotes the connections among the different elements of a written text. The context is what needs to be taken into account for the interpretation of a specific part of text. But the term has now been generalized for any hermeneutical problem, too. From the perspective I have taken here, context may refer either to the frames of reference to different functional areas or to the frames of localised action.

The problem of normativity and context thus refers to the issue of the validity of norms. Is there a general validity which stems from their normativity alone? Or do norms prove to be valid only in specific contexts, and how then can we identify those contexts? *From a sociological point of view there are strong arguments that the obligatory cha-*

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[2] For an exploration of these issues see F.-X. *Kaufmann:* Der Ruf nach Verantwortung - Risiko und Ethik in einer unüberschaubaren Welt. Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1992.

racter of norms is always conditional and that these conditions form the context of their validity.

This position clashes with the traditional conception of religion and religious norms. There may be in this respect some differences of emphasis between Catholicism and different streams of Protestant thought, but basically there is a strong sense of historical identity of the Christian Gospel which — from a theological point of view — forms the essence of Christianity. To develop our problem further I shall move now to the second part which is concerned with the endangered tradition of Christianity in present Western culture and thus with a problem that concerns most of us not only in an intellectual but also in an existential way.

2.   The endangered tradition of Christianity in post-modern culture

The practical context of our debate is — I assume — the dominant impression of the declining influence of Christianity in the process of modernization. At least in Western Europe — conditions may differ somewhat in other regions of the world — one can observe a significant loss of plausibility for Christian teachings, especially in the form they are presented by representatives of the churches. Insofar as the churches insist on specific commands and prohibitions they meet with growing indifference and a lack of insight. This seems particularly true with respect to issues of individual morality, not as much with issues of collective concern. Here the churches are expected „to speak truth to power", i.e. to admonish politicians and statesmen to care for the public good. To put it more sharply: the moral discourse of the churches is considered to be good for others, but not for oneself. There is an indifferent acceptance of religion which is deemed useful for society but not binding for ones own conscience. And this tendency is not restricted to people with only loose connections to their church but is also found among strong believers.[3] *There is evidence that the traditional homogeneity of religious orientations within certain denominations is waning and makes room for a plurality of highly in-*

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[3] Evidence of these tendencies can be found in many opinion polls in the last decades. E.g., in the inquiry among all Catholics preceding the German synod of 1971/75, 61% deemed „most important" that „The church shall urge politicians and statesmen of the world to care for justice and peace", whereas only 20% deemed that „the church should care about their personal salvation". See also F.-X. *Kaufmann/* W. *Kerber/* P.M. *Zulehner.* Ethos und Religion bei Führungskräften. München: Kindt-Verlag, 1986, pp. 132ss.

dividualized patterns of religiosity. At the same time the public consensus about religion is breaking up. Whereas it seemed taken for granted throughout Europe that religion was represented by the established Christian churches, there is now a growing awareness of the difference between ecclesiastical Christendom and religion. The public debate is more about 'civil religion' or 'new religious movements' and about the functions of religion than about the content the churches stand for.

We observe similar developments in the public discourse about the family: new forms of gender relations and households receive much more attention than the traditional family which is deemed to be decreasing in number or even on the way to extinction. To be sure, traditional forms of the family and also of church-related religiosity include still the large majority of the population, at least in most European countries. But they are spoken of as if they had no future, as if they were a passing form of social life. As a matter of fact there is an obvious decrease in the strong links among family and church in large parts of the younger generations.[4] These links still seem to be strong in most American denominations and were also of paramount importance for the religious socialisation in Europe. There is now a rather strong correlation between the waning of the traditional family pattern and the decline of religious orientation. At the same time we observe new forms of flexible or patchwork identities without strong convictions and with more opportunistic attitudes concerning moral issues.[5]

There is, in sum, a growing diffuseness about issues of religion and a loss of influence of the churches on the religious and moral orientations of individuals. Without going into further details I consider this situation to be characteristic of the current relationship between religion and modern society.[6] And I suggest that the topic of our conference focus on and be inspired by this challenging situation.

What I have sketched is an obvious change of the social context for religious socialisation, and it would be easy to add a list of other social changes during the last decades which are intertwined with it: e.g. the growing importance of television, the changing status of women, the spreading of birth control and the establishment of the welfare state.

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[4] For the Catholic case in Germany see H. *Tyrell:* Katholizismus und Familie: Institutionalisierung und Deinstitutionalisierung. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Sonderheft 33: Religion und Kultur. Opladen 1993, 126-149.

[5] Cf. R.N. *Bellah* et al.: Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985.

[6] Cf. F.-X. *Kaufmann*: Religion und Modernität. Tübingen 1989.

One could show that these and other factors did affect the position of churches also in other respects. Social services, for instance, which are run by churches are coming more and more under the pressures of public guidance and are dependent upon public funds. As a conseqence they are losing much of their former religious characteristics. The free accessibility to television programs allows new information and values to easily permeate traditional contexts. Parents feel helpless against the impact of mass media, school teachers and friends on their children. Moreover, the emancipation of women forms a challenge to traditional clericalism. With these and other changes in the social context religious traditions seem to lose their normativity in society at large, and their validity is restricted more and more to specific, and especially elder, groups of the population.

This is a sociological perspective. The question is open as to what it means for theology, especially for practical theology. At first glance there only seems to be hard choices: adaptation or resistence, liberalism or fundamentalism, fidelity to tradition or modernization of faith. But at the same time we know *that theological and religious practice is far from these hard choices*. It seeks compromises and solutions in ambivalent situations. Let me try to put these multifarious thoughts and experiences into the framework of normativity and context.

I do not dare to define what religious normativity precisely means and leave it open to later debate. But the hard choices I have just mentioned fit easily into the framework. The traditional positions maintain the independence of normativity and social context and are therefore concerned only with the norms and values of Christianity in their traditional form. Positions which are more open to the actual situation maintain that there is an essential relationship between normativity and social context. Therefore in order to maintain the relevance and plausibility of Christian values and norms one has to adapt them in the light of changing situations. Whereas the first position maintains an unchanging, 'eternal' validity of the Christian Gospel, the second sees the creative fruitfulness of the gospel precisely in its possiblities to be read from different perspectives in different social contexts. What is relevant in the Gospel and how it becomes operative for the betterment or salvation of men can therefore change and is changing today. We can term this position as 'modern' with good reason, because the legitimacy of change is an essential feature of modern culture.[7]

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[7]   The French *Encyclopédia Universalis* (Paris 1973) defines modernity as „morale canonique du changement". See also Kaufmann, Religion und Modernität, l.c. 35ff.

There are, of course, points for criticism in both positions. Against the traditional position one can show that there has indeed been substantial change in the interpretation of the Gospel during history and that the normative core of Christianity has not always been defined in the same way. Against the modern position one can argue that it lacks the criterium of identity if it wholly depends on the acceptability within a social context. Or to put it more pointedly: Does the normativity of the Gospel remain independent of its actual relevance or does actual relevance determine what is normative in it? I think that none of these

From a sociological point of view the Christian Gospel has never been two positions reflects what the history of Christianity does teach us. *two positions reflects what the history of Christianity does teach us.* There is for example, evidence that the specific hierarchical elements of the Catholic tradition do not stem from its Jewish origins but from the Roman element in Hellenism.[8] What we call Christianity is thus a variety of different inculturations of the Christian Gospel. The socalled history of Christianity refers to the sequence of inculturations in a specific regional context, especially in the realm of the Roman patriarchate.[9] *The fascinating point is that the commitment to the Christian Gospel never ended with the end of a specific constellation of its social and cultural forms but always found new expressions and followers in a new context.* And despite substantial changes in teaching and practice there is an obvious tradition of identical elements as the codified bible and some sacraments. Christianity has its own identity throughout the changes of its inculturation in different social contexts.

There is therefore good reason to postulate that both, the idea of transcendent normativity and of social context, is needed to understand what has happened to Christianity in its tradition through history. And in the same sense it seems promising for our actual situation to reflect on both − normativity and context − if we wish to find ways of locating the Christian Gospel in the context of modernity.

At first glance one could assume that in the division of labour among practical theology and sociology for the interpretation of normativity one would refer to practical theology and for he interpretation of context to sociology. With respect to the relationship of Christianity and modernization the normative interpretation of Christianity seems to be

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8   Cf. R. *Rilinger.* Zum kaiserzeitlichen Leistungs- und Rangdenken in Staat und Kirche. In: *Atti dell 'Academia Romanistica Constantiniana*, X Convegno Internazionale 1991: Ed. Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli, 1994, 223-264.

9   For an overview see F.-X. *Kaufmann*, Christentum und Christenheit. In: P. Gordan (Ed.), *Evangelium und Inkulturation* (1492 - 1992). Salzburger Hochschulwochen 1992. Graz: Styria, 1993, 101-128.

the job of theologists, and the interpretation of the context of moderni-
zation that of sociologists. But what about the relationships between
both? The real problem is indicated to by the insignificant word and in
the title of our conference. Although theologians may be more compe-
tent with respect to Christianity and sociologists with respect to mod-
ernization, the debate concerns precisely the relationship of both.
And, *neither theologians nor sociologists will be able to speak about it
without referring to both sides of the relationship*. Thus we need a de-
bate on two levels: on the more elementary level sociologists have to
understand Christianity, and theologians modernization; and everyone
must try to understand the meaning which the other is attributing to
both terms. Building on this we can then move to a more advanced
level of debate by exploring the relationship of both.

If we speak about *modernization* as a specific process in Western
civilization it is still a debated question where to begin: For a long time
the threshold of the 1780ies with its cumulation of cultural, technical,
political and economic changes was considered as paramount. Some
historians go back to the 16th and the 17the century as the end of the
Middle Ages. If one considers the *structural differentiation* of various
functions as the core process of modernization one can draw its ori-
gins back to the conflicts between the German Emperor and the Ro-
man Pope about the investment of bishops and abbots in the XI.
century. It was by the concordat of Worms in 1122 that the difference
of the spiritual and the secular became for the first time firmly estab-
lished and led to the secularisation of the hitherto sacramental charac-
ter of imperial and monarchical rule.[10]

The papal revolution, as Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy has termed the
'Investiture Struggle', began shortly after the great schism of 1054
which completed the cleavage between East and West. From this ti-
me a clear difference of structure in the relationship between spiritual
and secular leaders in both parts of Christianity became apparent.

Another trait of modernization, i.e. *individualization*, goes also back to
the XI. century. Then the hitherto apocalyptic vision of the Last Judg-
ment „acquired a new significance in the West through the parallel be-
lief in an intermediate judgment upon individual souls at the moment

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[10]   The importance of the Investiture Struggle for the development of the Western legal
       tradition has been emphasised by H. *Berman*, Law and Revolution. Cambridge Mass.:
       Harvard Univ. Pr. 1983. T. Parsons as well as M. Weber overlooked the threshold of
       the XI. and XII. century, whose importance is also emphasised by B. *Nelson*, Civiliza-
       tional Complexes and Intercivilizational Encounters. *Sociological Analysis* 34 (1973)
       79-105.

of their death". The vision of purgatory „as a temporal condition of punishment of individual Christian souls" fostered the concern about individual salvation.[11] The developing practice of private confessions became an institutionalized vehicle for self-consciousness. The claim for freedom of conscience then became later in the epoch of religious cleavages the vanguard for human rights and for the separation of church and state in the emerging American states.[12]

Functional differentiation of society and individualization of the conditions of life are mutually reenforcing processes which took place first in the realm of those medieval cities which became connected by extensive trade— from England to Northern Italy. From there the pattern of mercantilized production spread and with it the *importance of money* which is a basic condition for individualized life.[13] Eventually the restrictions to political rule by the constitutional movement and the establishment of civil society brought about those conditions which we consider today as characteristic for modern individualism.

There have been, however, *counteracting processes* which were strongly linked to religious developments. The Lutheran reformation as well as the Catholic counter-reformation reenforced the union of political and spiritual powers and formed the base for civic and industrial discipline. And with the merging of different confessions in the national states of the 19th century, confessional orientations and institutions became paramount for the structures of private life. The resulting tensions among the confessions have stabilised the religious and social orientations of all Christian denominations, especially in countries with a mixed population. It is only after World War II and especially since the 1960ies that traditional forms of religious life seem to break down more and more. The proportion of nonaffiliated people grows in most parts of Europe and there is a strong decline of religious knowledge and orientation among the younger generations as well.

In my view it is less the quantitative decline of church affiliation which signalizes a deep crisis of religious tradition but the observation that the remaining church members mostly belong to the traditional strata of the population. Forms of religious life which could be qualified as specific to the modern conditions of life are rare and scattered. *Chri-*

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[11] Berman, l.c. 169.

[12] Cf. E.S. *Morgan*, Inventing the People. The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America. New York, London: Norton 1988, 295ss.

[13] Cf. G. *Simmel*, Philosophie des Geldes, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1968.

stianity still has to prove that it is able to inculturate also under mo-dern conditions and in a post-modern culture.

3.   Consequences for practical theology

Is there anybody within the churches to be concerned with this issue? I think that it is the specific task of practical theology to deal with the issue of mediation between Christian tradition and the social contexts of modernity. But how can this take place?

The Second Vatican Council has been an impressive attempt to the 'aggiornamento' of the Catholic tradition. Although there is no explicit reference to modernity in its texts, there are obvious references which relate to the modern context, e.g. the acknowledgement of the princi-ple of religious freedom in Dignitatis Humanae, or the concern with the relationship of church and the world of today in the pastoral constitu-tion Gaudium et Spes.[14] Moreover the basic tenets of Catholic thought have been adapted to the challenges of modern ecumenical theology, e.g. the relationship of the written bible to tradition in the constitution about revelation Dei Verbum and the concept of the church itself in Lumen Gentium. It was the explicit program of the council to develop a double interpretation of the self-understanding of the Catholic church, i.e. ad intra (as to the Catholic church itself) and ad extra (as to other churches and the world society at large*). This clear distinction of the church as a system within a wider social con-text marked a new epoque and reflects the sociological interpretation of modern society in terms of functional differentiation.*[15]

The switch from anti-modern normativism to a contextual attitude is particularly marked in the case of the Vatican Council, but it has also provoked strong reactions. However *the contextual method does not necessarily mean that normative commitments have to be abandoned or openly adapted to the expectations of an external context.* There may be also a critical approach to the secular context from the Chris-tian perspective. An important example for this seems to be the book by John Milbank: *Theology and Social Theory - Beyond Secular*

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[14]   Cf. J.A. *Komonchak*: Vatican II and the Encounter between Catholicism and Libera-lism. In: *Catholicism and Liberalism - Contributions to American Public Philosophy.* Ed. by R.B. Douglass and D. Hollenbach. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1994, 76-99. (German translation in: Kaufmann/Zingerle, see next footnote).

[15]   For an assessment of Vatican II in the perspective of modernization see F.-X. Kauf-mann/A. Zingerle (Eds.), *Vatikan II und Modernisierung.* Historische, theologische und soziologische Perspektiven. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996.

Reason.[16] This study is a erudition of a theological dispute with the main intellectual trends of modernity and develops a Christian Social Theory in the context of post-modern thought. Milbank objects to any mediation between theological and modern secular thought, including empirical sociology, and presents instead a proper Christian vision of society in the tradition of Augustines 'City of God'. I was impressed by the consistent argumentation of the author which is on the post-modern level of meta-narratives. Modern meta-narratives are, he asserts, a perversion of theology. If for example, the scientific explanation of nature and history binds the divine operation to this level one ends up holding God responsible for all the evils of this world. Milbank shows in a convincing way that the meta-narrative of science, technology, and the state, is the *will to power*, and that there is only a little step from the struggle for power to *violence*. He then asks the question: What is the better meta-narrative, the individualistic or collectivistic will to power or the the belief that men have been created by a loving God and are invited to search together for the perfection of being? He offers a strong argument in his work. And although I am a sociologist its relevance to my field remains, despite the fact that it constitutes a theological debate. *For the ideal of the city of God remains utopian if it is not interpreted in the context of an actual society.*

Coming back again to the issue of normativity one has to acknowledge that an important source to the validity of norms within the secularized individualistic culture of post-modernity is *self-commitment*. This does not mean that the norms the individual commits to validate are invented by him. Quite to the contrary the individual is normally unable to create the norms he or she needs to live with.[17] Instead *the individual selects the norms he will comply with from the cultural stock of his social context.* Seen at the level of the whole society this stock is much too complex and the respective norms are often contradictory so that it would be impossible to commit to them all. This is the reason why the commitment to certain norms is often restricted to particular contexts. This is the case on the level of culture which organises around characteristic functions as I have mentioned earlier. But it operates also on the level of decisions where

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[16]　J. *Milbank*: Theology and Social Theory - Beyond Secular Reason. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

[17]　To a certain extent the artist seems to be an exception as the quality of its art depends precisely on its capacity to create a new set of rules of expression. Perhaps this is the reason why the artist seems to become (after the enterpreneur and the bureaucrat) the paradigmatic figure in late modernity. Cf. Kaufmann, Religion und Modernität, l.c. 191ff.

an action frame of reference always implies the selection of specific norms.

The relationship of normativity and context has reached a new quality in the process of modernization. In traditional societies there was a clear cut social context which was so evident to contemporaries that it respresented reality per se. Also the Christian Gospel operated with evident normativity in christianized societies as part of this social and cultural context. People also stood in an immediate and similar relationship to their common context. Although there were strong differences of rank and status it was precisely by rank and status that traditional society was segregated into various contexts of life. Modernization is a process in which these homogeneous forms of context break up and become substituted by the already mentioned functional contexts of the economy, the polity, the family, etc. We live in a functionally differentiated universe whose unifying sense consists precisely in the plurality of perspectives. The 'whole' or 'the world' has become overcomplex and heterogeneous, and the so-called postmodern consciousness is an expression of this situation for the first time. In the perspective of individuals this condition is often experienced as ambiguity.[18]

From a sociological perspective there is, however, an additional point to make. The transformation from a ranked society to a functionally differentiated network of national societies means also a *growing organizational complexity.* In traditional societies a person normally belonged to a unique group, to a village, for instance, or in cities to a corporation. *Modern organizations do not embrace the whole context of individual life but the specific form of inclusion is membership.* That means that specific rights and duties are bound to the status of membership which is normally not an inherited but an achieved status of civil law which is ended by retirement, exit or dismissal. In a modern society the social status of a person consists in the set of its various memberships. Each organization has its own norms the member has to comply with. This evidence of organizational norms which are of an obvious particular character and by the way normally legitimated by the overarching ideology of a functional subsystem is engraved in our habits and in the dominant concept of normativity. *There is so to say a broken and altogether mediated relationship between individuals and the 'prominent ideas' of our culture. What seems normative in Christi-*

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[18] Cf. K. *Lüscher/* A. *Lange:* Nach der „postmodernen" Familie. In: H.P. Buba, N.F. Schneider (Eds.), *Familie: Zwischen gesellschaftlicher Prägung und individuellem Design.* Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996 (in print).

an tradition is no longer self-evident but reaches the individual by different and heterogeneous channels. One channel is the teaching of a religious community to which a person belongs in the form of membership, and this is just one membership among others. Another channel is the immediate context of relevant persons— parents, teachers and friends. A third one is the Christian tradition implicit in our constitutions and general culture, both mediated by schools books and mass media. *This heterogeneity of experiences is the basic fact of socialization in modernized societies, and it has far-reaching consequences for the impact of ecclesiastical actions.* The ecclesiastical frame of reference has become a particular one which is more or less isolated from other frames of reference. This is the main reason of its reduced impact.

I have to stop here for reasons of time. I will try to summarize my argument. The conditions in which we live today in Western societies exhibit a high degree of security and predictability never attained before in history of mankind. This is the result of our specialising and lengthening of chains of action, a concomitant of functional differentiation of our systems of meaning and of the emergence of the organized forms of a division of labour. The result is an ongoing growth of complexity in human societies which forces persons to become *individuals*, i.e. to organize their own life by developing their own standards of selectivity and rules of action. This happens generally not by invention but by a more or less conscious selection among existing standards and rules in the institutional and cultural stock of a society. *Christian traditions belong to this stock in a much broader sense than they can be presented within religious communication.* And religious communication itself has become bound to the narrow realm of denominational or ecclesiastical opportunities. The social context of the tradition of the Christian creed as well as of Christian values and norms has become more fragmented than ever before. To become a believer is therefore more difficult than in traditional societies and needs a complex process of 'polythetic learning' (A. Schutz).[19] To become a believer and to be a faithful follower of the church means to develop within ones consciousness a cognitive and emotional orientation which organizes experience under the auspices of central elements of the Christian creed. Traditions, obedience and habits are no longer enough, they tend to lose significance and relevance. *The self-commitment to the normativity of the Christian Gospel is therefore a*

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[19]   Cf. F.-X. *Kaufmann*, Glaube und Kommunikation: eine soziologische Perspektive. In: D. Wiederkehr (Ed.), *Der Glaubenssinn des Gottesvolkes - Konkurrent oder Partner des Lehramts?* Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1994, 132-160.

necessary condition for its validity. The claim of ecclesiastical authorities to be the moral authority will under the condition of modernity gradually become void.

All this has to do with the changing social context of Christianisation. The tradition of the Gospel has always also been a social process, but this could remain unconscious as far as it has been self-evident. But today these social processes have become so complex that they need to be taken into account by theologians, too. Theology is the reflexive power of religion. In a world whose sense is no longer given but has to be found again and again within different frames of reference through reflection, the sense of religion needs a to increase reflection as well as. Even if the basic messages of the Gospel are simple, and religious experience in its core is something which transcends the intricacies of all our inquiries, one may safely predict that the task of theology will become even more important. And *the quality of the deliberation by practical theology will depend upon the capacity to link normativity and context.* The inculturation of the Christian creed in the structures of modernity is still an unsolved challenge for all religious communities.