Ingolf U. Dalferth

Transcendence and the Secular World

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Life in Orientation to Ultimate Presence

Translated by
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and translated edition

Mohr Siebeck

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To the PRT students in Claremont
who fought for their program

Preface to the 2018 English Edition

This book is the last of a series of studies written in recent years on questions of human life and existence. The translation of the first book of that series was published under the title *Creatures of Possibility. The Theological Basis of Human Freedom* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerAcademic, 2016). The second *Selbstlose Leidenschaft: Christlicher Glaube und menschliche Passionen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) has not been translated yet. The third one is the present volume. I am greateful to Jo Bennett who has again produced an excellent translation. She is a master of the art of translation, and I am fortunate to have had the chance of working with her.

I also wish to thank Katharina Gutekunst from Mohr Siebeck for her interest in the translation and the constructive collaboration in the production of the book. Marlene Block has again been of invaluable help. I am grateful to her.

The book is dedicated to the Philosophy of Religion and Theology (PRT) students in Claremont who stood up and fought for their program because they believe in academic excellence and the future of the humanities.

Ingolf U. Dalferth

Preface to the 2015 German Edition

As long as it is necessary to emphasise that we are living in a secular age, we are not yet living in one. Even in the 21st century, religions play an important role in our world, in the private lives of many people and in the public sphere. It is daily apparent that this is not entirely a good thing. Religions can bring out the best in human beings, but they can also delude them into doing their worst. They paint us a picture of heaven, yet they can make life hell on earth. To them we owe our insights into the harmony of the universe, the power of love and the possibilities of a shared humanity. But time and again, human lives are devastated by the destruction of order, the temptation to hatred, the suppression of freedom and the justification of inhumanity beyond comprehension. We need to pay heed to both, where religion and non-religion are concerned. To live religiously is not good *per se*, and to live non-religiously is not evil *per se*. In both cases it depends on *how* one is what one is and *how* one does what one does. One can live non-religiously and be an exemplary human being, and one can believe one is living a religious life and behave like a beast.

Christians therefore do well to see the secular world and society not purely in negative terms, but to strive for a discriminating view and attitude. In many respects it is an advantage that we no longer live in a society dominated by religion, but in a secular one, in which freedom of religion is held to be a fundamental right. Undoubtedly we may deplore the loss, in Western modernity, of much that is familiar. Yet much which was the stuff of dreams has been gained. No one who has the good fortune to live in a free society which values justice and equality, respects the distinction between state and religion and upholds

the fundamental right of freedom of religion can seriously want to forgo all of that. Never have people been able to live as freely by their religious convictions as they can in secular Western society. But never has there been such bitter opposition, backed by appeals to religious conviction, to the modern principles of freedom without which such a life would not have been possible.

Christian theology ought to be adopting a critical attitude to the current swan song of secularisation and the fashionable heralding of a new post-secular religious era. From the very beginning, the Christian faith has made a decisive contribution to the worldlification of the world, the critical appraisal of religion, religions and religiosity and the re-creation of human life in the presence of God. Christians have been and are being persecuted regularly on account of this critical faith. Christian faith is about the orientation to God's presence in all spheres of life, beyond the boundaries of prevalent religious forms and often in distinction from them. Correctly understood, the Christian life orientation[1] moves beyond the alternative between religious and non-religious life. Its point of reference is not any distinction between the profane and the holy in the world; rather, it is the self-mediating presence of God, and the distinction, established by this presence of God within the possibility space of the world, between a life that orients itself to that presence (faith), and a life which does not (unfaith). The philosophical code of this life orientation is the distinction between transcendence and immanence in the practices of life.[2] These signify, not distinct areas of life, but different attitudes towards all areas of life on the basis of an event

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[1] On the concept of life orientation cf. I. U. DALFERTH, *Selbstlose Leidenschaften. Christlicher Glaube und menschliche Passionen*, Tübingen 2013, 48–50.

[2] In this book I use 'transcendence' as a shorthand term for 'the transcendence' and 'the transcendent'. Where there is need of a more detailed definition of this orientational concept as it contrasts with 'immanence', it is given in the relevant context.

which can be encoded as the irruption of transcendence into immanence and which can lead to the reorientation of life as it is opened up to transcendence. This philosophical distinction is paralleled in Christian life and thinking in the distinctions between creator and creation, divine and worldly, the ultimate presence of God, unchanging and effective everywhere, and the changing presence in which we live temporarily, whether it be in faith, in which humans live their lives in orientation to the ultimate presence, or in unfaith, in which they do not.

This book is about orientation to this ultimate presence and to the primacy of transcendence within the immanence of a secular world. This primacy manifests itself in life by means of events that are often completely ordinary, but which create an awareness of the distinction between transcendence and immanence by showing that and how transcendence is distinct from immanence, making itself present and interpreting itself *as* transcendence. And since we are unable to orient ourselves by this guiding distinction without making further distinctions, it is about the distinctions by which such a life orientation to the ultimate presence takes place in practice, consciously in faith, and factually in unfaith.

The book deals with material from the following publications: Religion als Privatsache? Zur Öffentlichkeit von Glaube und Theologie, *Theologisch-praktische Quartalschrift 149* (2001) 284–297 (Chapter H); Glaubensvernunft oder Vernunftglauben? Anmerkungen zur Vernunftkritik des Glaubens, in: F. Schweitzer (ed.), *Kommunikation über Grenzen*, Gütersloh 2009, 612–627 (Chapter D); Weder möglich noch unmöglich. Zur Phänomenologie des Unmöglichen, *Archivio di Filosofia / Archives of Philosophy LXXVIII* (2010) 49–66 (Chapter G); Religionsfixierte Moderne? Der lange Weg vom säkularen Zeitalter zur post-säkularen Welt, *Denkströme. Journal der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 7* (2011) 9–32 (Chapter A); Ist Glauben menschlich?, *Denkströme. Journal der Sächsischen*

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A. Orientation by Distinctions.
Christian faith and the secular world

We live in a secular age in which faith in God, the gods or the divine is no longer the norm, but has become just one option amongst others.[1] This is true despite considerable differences between the regions of the world, and despite the fact that the secularisation process varies in different cultural contexts and certainly does not always lead to the dissolution or dismantling of religious affiliations and orientations.

1. Secularity, religion and spirituality

Secularisation – the "worldlification" of the world – can take many forms, not all of which rule out the possibility that people are leading a religious or spiritual life. There is a difference, but no sharp dividing line, between the two. It is true that religion exists only in the diversity of world religions; however, it is not just someone who participates in collective religious practice who lives religiously, but also anyone who reverences the order and diversity of life and is careful to follow the precepts that give life a deeper meaning. And spirituality, too, consists not simply in participation in the conventional pious practices of a religious tradition, but is understood in a broader sense as the search for meaning and for a life that experiences "connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the

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[1] Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA 2007; H. Joas, *Faith as an Option: Possible Futures for Christianity*, Stanford 2014.

significant or sacred".[2] However, not all religion, religiosity or spirituality equates to consciousness of transcendence, and not all consciousness of transcendence is religious or spiritual. There are 'religions' such as Shintō or Confucianism that consider life to be lived predominantly in the here and now, and there is an awareness of transcendence in numerous cultural communities that neither are nor wish to be religious.

Even in the West, leaving the church is not necessarily the same as loss of religion, but rather the reverse side of a search that turns to other religious forms and a creative, selective and individuating acceptance of unfamiliar spiritual traditions. Those who seek find a great deal. And those who do not (any longer) find what they are seeking in the traditional forms of their religion and culture will seek it elsewhere. But what is being sought? Perhaps it is a search for religion as something with which one can align oneself because one has to make an explicit decision in favour of it. Religion is meaningless if it does not confront me with existential decisions that give me a new view of myself, my world, others and God. In that case it is merely an inherited social custom, which one can dispense with, since it neither demands anything from one, nor reveals anything to one. One does not even need to oppose or criticise it in order to be free of it: one simply ignores it.

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2. Being a Christian as a dual and double-sided decision

This linking of religion, decision and identity is a phenome-non characteristic of modernity. But it has a long prehistory, closely connected with the history of Christianity. Christianity originally began as an eschatological religion of decision, in a twofold sense. According to Christian conviction, God showed himself in Jesus Christ and through his Spirit to be the one who has decided permanently and irrevocably for human beings, even though they are living as sinners, leading a life that ignores God and is remote from him. That is the heart of the Christian message of God's redemptive coming to renew the world out of love for his creatures. Humans, for their part, can decide for or against God's decision by placing their faith in the Christian message of God's decision for them, or by not doing so, either because they do not know the facts of this message, or because they explicitly refuse or reject it. If they do put their faith in it, they do not consider this to be their own decision, but rather to be the work of God, who decided unconditionally for human beings, as became clear in and through Jesus Christ, and who through his Spirit enables them to decide for this decision, demonstrated by their change from unfaith to a life of faith. In their baptism Christians acknowledge God's decision as their unmerited gift, which has freed them from their old attachments and orientations and which opens the door to a new form of life with God and with each other. When they present themselves for baptism, they are deciding for a life of faith and simultaneously against a life of unfaith. God's decision for human beings (Jesus Christ) and his self-mediation of this decision to human beings (Spirit) means that the old life of remoteness from and rejection of God is left behind and the new life in fellowship with God, opened up by God through Jesus Christ and the Spirit, becomes not just possible, but actual (new being). Of his own free will God has made himself our neighbour, so that all human beings

can call on him as their good father and are to be considered and treated as children, heirs and neighbours of God. In this new community of God's neighbours there are – as Paul says – no longer Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, men or women (Gal. 3:28), since none of those distinctions are determining factors for the new life in Christ.

God's neighbours' new identity is not their own choice, but a free gift from God. No one can obtain it for themselves, nor does anyone have a right to it, which is why no one has a greater right to it than anyone else. Where it enters someone's consciousness, it is perceived as a gift and a mission from God which is not attached to any prior conditions. One can accept it in faith as it stands, or ignore and refuse it in unfaith. Both responses confirm that this new identity is a gift and provision that does not depend on one's own acceptance or rejection, but precedes them and is what makes them possible at all. It is not something one had always been searching for, but the experience of something unexpected and new, of the improbable possibility that God is becoming neighbour to those who do not care about him. To find one's identity as a neighbour of God, it is not even necessary that one is engaged in a search for it. It can happen against one's own wishes and intentions, as when Paul was converted from being a persecutor of Christians to becoming an apostle of Christ, for instance. Where it meets with a response, it leads to the identity being split into an old and a new self. As Paul writes in Romans 7, the existential tension between the two cannot be resolved in either direction, but can only be endured with the help of God. One is no longer in control of oneself, but, as God's neighbour, one belongs to another's sphere of control, whether one welcomes that in faith or disregards or disputes it in unfaith.

One can acknowledge this new identity by giving thanks for God's gift, being baptised and thus deciding against a life in unfaith and for a life in faith in the Christ-community of the new being. Alternatively, one can reject God's gift and refuse the

change of orientation to a life in faith, thus remaining in the Adam-community of the old being. Every human being belongs to this old humanity (Adam) in which everything revolves around self-assertion, self-preservation and self-promotion, which is why a life in faith can only ever exist when one turns away from a life in unfaith. But everyone can in fact belong to the new humanity (Christ), which God opens up to us by making himself our neighbour in such a way that love for God, and for everyone else as God's neighbours, can determine our lives. However, just as the decision for Christ does not in itself constitute the new being, so equally the non-decision for, or the decision against, Christ does not negate the new being. God's gift and thus God's decision for human beings precedes any human decision-making (dual decision). God's decision is what makes the human decision possible in the first place: now we can live a life oriented towards God's love in reliance on God's gift, and can decide against unfaith and for a life in faith (double-sided decision).[3] But God's decision also makes the human decision essential: given God's decision, a lack of an explicit human decision for or against it is nonetheless a decision – in which case it can remain uncertain whether such a non-decision must always constitute a decision against, or whether the acutal life of the one concerned can in fact offer proof of the opposite.

These are the fundamental characteristics of the new being in Christ, as outlined by Paul. The more, however, a life orientation in accordance with the new being in Christ was reduced to one religious form amongst others, becoming, in the Roman empire, the dominant religion into which one was born and within

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[3] Deciding for a life in faith and against a life in unfaith are the two sides of one and the same decision, not two different acts of decision. But this double-sided decision is contingent upon and enabled by the prior decision on God's part, without which there neither could nor would be a human decision for a life with God and against a life of disregard for or denial of the presence of God.

which one grew up culturally and socially, the less this dual moment of decision shaped and characterised Christian being and consciousness. Of course it was kept in mind in the church's baptismal practice. However, the practice of infant baptism emphasised the gift-character of faith in Christ and being Christian, and therefore God's decision for the human being, but only to a lesser extent the human decision for God's decision in taking leave of the old and turning to the new life. The church's introduction of confirmation is a reaction to this problem. The debate over the practice of infant baptism and the call for adult baptism are examples of the conflicts that arose from this. While the one stresses God's unconditional antecedent decision for human beings, the other insists on the human responsibility to make one's own decision for God's prior decision. And whereas for the one, membership of the church is the social norm, to be adopted out of regard for the church as an institution, for the other no church membership is legitimate in Christian terms unless it is based on a personal decision. Unless you decide in favour yourself, you do not really belong. And one who explicitly decides against has at least understood that a decision has to be made.

3. Religion in late modernity

The conflict is a paradigm for the way modernity handles religion. The process of modernity has led increasingly to religion being deemed a social and cultural given. One participated in it, one could even participate in it in a purely external manner, without taking any specific decision. It has become a mark of the individual identity, distinctiveness, authenticity, perhaps even the sacrality of the person. Whether one lives religiously or not, one ought to do either from conviction. Just joining in by itself is not enough, but nor is not joining in. One must make a wholehearted commitment for or against. But the price of

this pressure to identify oneself is high. When it is a matter of authenticity and one's own identity, even the incidental becomes significant. Nothing can be up for negotiation, everything has to be defended: images in church, crosses on mountain tops or in courtrooms, public holidays, cultic vestments, Latin masses, rites of circumcision and full-body veils. Everything is always pivotal, and one's very self is constantly at stake. No longer is there any distinction between the issue and the person, between the important and the less important.

For many that is just too demanding. But they cannot avoid the pressure to identify by questioning the coupling of religion with identity, but only by becoming indifferent to everything religious. They are not for one religion and against others, nor are they even for or against religion as a whole. All that no longer has anything to do with them and their identity. Everything religious has ceased to be of interest to them and they seek their authenticity and identity elsewhere.

Others hold onto the idea that religion and faith are pivotal to one's own identity, but can no longer find this identity within the bounds of traditional religious forms. They are not abandoning faith and religion themselves, but their institutionalised social forms and organisational membership structures. They are searching for other forms of spiritual life, and they find them easily in the global market of religions, where supply and demand constantly reinforce each other. As Daniel Bell stated, back in the seventies: "Where religions fail, cults appear."[4]

Thus we cannot speak of the end of religion. Even in an enlightened Europe religion is still present in numerous different ways, both in private life and in the public arena.[5] And there is

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[4] D. Bell, *Die Zukunft der westlichen Welt. Kultur und Technologie im Widerstreit*, Frankfurt a. M. 1979, 201.

[5] Th. Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion* (1967), Frankfurt a. M. 2005; P. L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Washington, D. C. 1999.

some evidence that trends in the development of fundamentalist movements, as seen not only in Islam, but also in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism,[6] may actually be caused by the alienating forces of economic, technological, cultural and media-oriented globalisation, rather than by the functional differentiation of society and a politically, legally, morally and scientifically secularising modernity.[7] In order to participate on an equal footing in political and legal affairs, morality and science, and to be recognised in those fields, one can be, but does not necessarily have to be, religious. Each of these spheres has its own logic, its own norms and values and its own guiding principles. A religious orientation cannot be a determining factor, in either a negative or a positive sense, if peaceful coexistence between humans of differing convictions and philosophies of life is to be possible in a plural society.[8]

This has changed the traditional religions themselves, as well. The conflict between religion and the secular world long ago became a conflict within the religious traditions themselves. And in fact, not just a conflict between premodern and modern trends in individual religions, but to an even greater extent a conflict-ridden split among those who are not closed off in a traditionalistic way to social modernisation processes, but actively react to them. Thus there are some who endeavour to establish a positive relationship with these processes and to update their religious traditions in line with modern conditions, while others

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[6] Cf. C. Six / S. Haas / M. Riesebrodt (ed.), *Religiöser Fundamentalismus: Vom Kolonialismus zur Globalisierung*, Innsbruck 2005.

[7] Cf. B. Kaiser, Der Terror der Entwurzelung. Die Ursache des Neofundamentalismus, *Neue Ordnung 2* (2013) 19–23; M. Mies, Globalisierung und religiöser Fundamentalismus (http://www.was-die-ma ssenmedien-verschweigen.de/aktuell/GlobalisierungFundamentalismu s.pdf) (12/8/2014).

[8] Cf. F. W. Graf, *Dient Religion dem guten Leben? Ein Plädoyer gegen jede Selbstverabsolutierung,* Hamburg 2012; idem, *Götter global. Wie die Welt zum Supermarkt der Religionen wird*, München 2014.

adopt a negative, fundamentalist stance and reject the challenges of modernity, not just ignoring them but actively opposing them. The definitive signature of the current religious situation is not the conflict between traditionalists and modernists. Rather it is the conflict between reformers, who are attempting to affirm in a new way the basic insights of their religion under the dynamically changing conditions of late modernity, and fundamentalists, who do not want to engage with the questions posed by modernity, but rather to oppose it actively in the name of their religion and to set up their own construct of their religious tradition. They are both modernisers. However, the former see modernity as a religious challenge with which they are engaging, whereas the latter perceive it as a call to a religious antimodernity, which they are using modern means to affirm.

4. Sociological interpretations

All this has been discussed in detail in recent years.[9] One can, in company with José Casanova and Charles Taylor, question the sustainability of an oversimplifying undifferentiated theory of

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[9] Cf. J. Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago / London 1994; D. Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, Aldershot 2005; D. Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract. An Essay in Political Theology*, Princeton 2005; J. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton 2005; Taylor, *A Secular Age*. An overview of older literature in English is provided by K. M. Schultz, Secularization: A Bibliographic Essay, *Hedgehog Review* (2006) 170–178. For a wider appreciation of the debate as it affects the field of law, cf. H. Dreier, *Säkularisierung und Sakralität. Zum Selbstverständnis des modernen Verfassungsstaates*, Tübingen 2013. For the theological backgrounds to the secularisation thesis, cf. J. Dierken, Immanente Eschatologie? Säkularisierung bei Hegel, Troeltsch und Löwith, in: idem, *Ganzheit und Kontrafaktizität. Religion in der Sphäre des Sozialen*, Tübingen 2014, 219–238.

secularisation and develop counter-narratives,[10] or one can, with Detlef Pollack and others, point to comprehensive and meaningful empirical data that ought not to be ignored.[11] One can adopt Niklas Luhmann's view that, although religion does not necessarily have to play a role in the life of every human being, on a social level it examines a basic problem which no society can evade: religion observes "the un-observability of the world and of the observer"[12] and thus considers the basic prerequisite for all social reality: the improbable possibility of meaning. One can, as Habermas does, turn this around so that one sees, in the traditional elements of religion, not just premodern conflict potential, but normative resources of meaning which can be rendered fruitful through the translation of religious content into a neutral language for use in a plural democracy and liberal civil society.[13] One can take such perspectives, with their focus

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[10] Casanova, *Public Religions*; Taylor, *A Secular Age.*

[11] D. Pollack, *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland,* Tübingen 2003; idem, *Rückkehr des Religiösen? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und in Europa II,* Tübingen 2009; idem / U. Willems / H. Basu / Th. Gutmann / U. Spohn (eds.), *Moderne und Religion: Kontroversen um Modernität und Säkularisierung,* Bielefeld 2012; K. Gabriel / Chr. Gärtner / D. Pollack (eds.), *Umstrittene Säkularisierung. Soziologische und historische Analysen zur Differenzierung von Religion und Politik,* Berlin 2012; U. Oevermann / M. Franzmann, Strukturelle Religiosität auf dem Wege zur religiösen Indifferenz, in: M. Franzmann / Chr. Gärtner / N. Köck (eds.), *Religiosität in der säkularisierten Welt. Theoretische und empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie,* Wiesbaden 2006, 49–82.

[12] N. Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft,* published by A. Kieserling, Frankfurt a. M. 2000, 29.

[13] J. Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen. German Book Trade Peace Prize 2001,* Suhrkamp special edition, Frankfurt a. M. 2001; idem, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze,* Frankfurt a. M. 2005; K. Wenzel / Th. M. Schmidt (eds.), *Moderne Religion? Theologische und religionsphilosophische Reaktionen auf Jürgen Habermas,* Freiburg i. Br. 2009; M. Breul, *Religion in der politischen Öffentlichkeit. Zum*

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