

Theology, Religion, Culture. Reflections on Systematic Theology following Paul Tillich*

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ABSTRACT

Following Paul Tillich, the article sketches the basic lines of a systematic theology of modern culture in the age of religious pluralism. It begins with a brief reconstruction of the systematic foundations of Tillich's theory of culture from the 1919 draft *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*. Then, the systematic problems of Tillich's theology of culture, which primarily concern his concept of religion, are discussed. In order to resolve these difficulties, it is proposed to understand religion as a self-referential, self-aware, and in itself structured communication event, as well as to dispense with a general concept of religion, as Tillich advocates it. On this basis, the concluding third section of the paper elaborates basic features of a systematic theology of culture which takes up Tillich's intention, giving it not only a different justification, but also a different direction. In addition to the text of the article, we reproduce some reactions and questions to the lecturer.

Keywords: Paul Tillich; theology of culture; systematic theology; religious communication.

Teologia, religião, cultura. Reflexões sobre a teologia sistemática seguindo Paul Tillich

RESUMO

Seguindo Paul Tillich, o artigo esboça as linhas básicas de uma teologia sistemática da cultura moderna na era do pluralismo religioso. O artigo começa com uma breve reconstrução dos fundamentos sistemáticos da

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teoria da cultura de Tillich a partir do esboço *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, de 1919. Em seguida, os problemas sistemáticos da teologia da cultura de Tillich, que dizem respeito principalmente ao seu conceito de religião, são discutidos. A fim de resolver essas dificuldades, propõe-se entender a religião como um evento de comunicação autorreferencial, autoconsciente e em si mesmo estruturado, bem como prescindir de um conceito geral de religião, como defende Tillich. Com base nisso, a terceira seção conclusiva do artigo elabora as características básicas de uma teologia sistemática da cultura que retoma a intenção de Tillich, conferindo-a não apenas uma justificativa diferente, como também uma direção distinta. Em complemento ao texto do artigo, reproduzimos algumas reações e perguntas ao conferencista.

Palavras-chave: Paul Tillich; teologia da cultura; teologia sistemática; comunicação religiosa.

Paul Tillich's theology is one of the most important and influential conceptions of the 20th century. In particular, his theology of culture has exercised a broad fascination with his work and virtually become his trademark. This includes the thesis that religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.¹ It aims at enabling a religious interpretation of reality as a whole. In his theology of culture, which Tillich elaborated above all after the First World War, he took up fundamental motifs of the so-called modern-positive theology of his teachers Adolf Schlatter and Wilhelm Lütgert.² These motifs become visible above all in the criticism of soteriological theological concepts, i.e., of limitations of God's revelation to Jesus Christ, which can be found in Tillich's complete works. With Schlatter and Lütgert, Tillich assumes a general revelation of God in creation and places the revelation of God in Christ within this framework. Tillich's reception of

¹ Cf. TILLICH, P. Religionsphilosophie. In: ALBRECHT, R. (Hg.). **Gesammelte Werke**. Band 1: Frühe Hauptwerke. Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1959, p. 297-364, especially, p. 319-321. In this connection, cf. ABREU, F. H. "Richtung auf das Unbedingte" and "Self-Transparency": The Foundations of Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Spirit, Meaning, and Religion (1919-1925). **Revista Eletrônica Correlatio**, vol. 16, no. 1, 2017, p. 5-97.

² Cf. DANZ, C. **The Theology of Paul Tillich**. Contexts and Issues. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2022 (in print); DANZ, C. Historicism, Neo-Idealism, and Modern Theology. Paul Tillich and German Idealism. In: STEWART, J. (Ed.). **The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Existentialism**. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 287-303.

German Idealism, i.e., the philosophies of Fichte and Schelling in the period before World War I, must be understood in this problem-historical context. Tillich is concerned with a better epistemological-critical grounding of modern-positive theology. Also, Tillich's relationship to the new theologies elaborated after World War I by Friedrich Gogarten and Karl Barth can only be understood in terms of his having been influenced by the modern-positive theologies of his academic teachers.³ For with the dialectical theologians Tillich shares the view that God is strictly transcendent and distinct from the world. There is no way to God from human beings. Knowledge of God is consistently bound to God's revelation. Tillich's difference to Barth and Gogarten does not lie, therefore, in the concept of revelation, but in its version. Tillich opposes the restriction of God's revelation to Christ with the assertion of a general revelation of creation.

Tillich's theology of culture, which we will deal with in the following under the guiding terms "theology, religion, culture", results from his version of the concept of revelation. In order to explore the significance of his conception for the debates in the 21st century, we have to turn to the construction as well as the structural elements of his theology. Only after this has been done and we have formed an image of the systematic foundations of his theology, can we name its limits and pursue the question in relation to which form Tillich's idea of a theology of culture can be continued under the conditions of the 21st century. In doing so, it will become clear that Tillich's own foundation of a theology of culture on the basis of a general concept of religion cannot be continued under the conditions of a pluralistic culture and society. Rather, it must be replaced by a conception that pays more

³ Cf. TILLICH, P. Kritisches und positives Paradoxes. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Barth und Friedrich Gogarten. In: ALBRECHT, R. (Hg.). **Gesammelte Werke**. Band VII: Der Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung. Schriften zur Theologie I. Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1962, p. 216-225; BARTH, K. Von der Paradoxie des „positiven Paradoxes“. Antworten und Fragen an Paul Tillich. In: ALBRECHT, R. (Hg.). **Gesammelte Werke**. Band VII: Der Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung. Schriften zur Theologie I, p. 226-239; TILLICH, P. Antwort. In: ALBRECHT, R. (Hg.). **Gesammelte Werke**. Band VII: Der Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung. Schriften zur Theologie I, p. 240-243; GOGARTEN, F. Zur Geisteslage des Theologen. In: ALBRECHT, R. (Hg.). **Gesammelte Werke**. Band VII: Der Protestantismus als Kritik und Gestaltung. Schriften zur Theologie I, p. 244-246.

attention to the differences and distinctions of religions. Only in this way can a theology of culture be elaborated under the conditions of the present times, which then, of course, also acquires a quite different function from that developed by Tillich himself.

The structure of my remarks results from the question just indicated about the significance of Tillich's theology of culture for our present. I will begin with a look at the systematic foundations of Tillich's theology of culture. I will limit myself here primarily to his 1919 draft *Justification and Doubt*, which offers the first detailed systematic unfolding of a theology of culture that forms, as it were, the background of Tillich's famous lecture *On the Idea of a Theology of Culture* from the same year. As we will see, Tillich retains the systematic grounding he elaborated in the 1919 draft, except for a few modifications, all the way to his late *Systematic Theology*. In the second section, we will deal with the systematic problems of Tillich's theology of culture, which primarily concern his concept of religion. In order to resolve these difficulties, I will present a proposal for a redefinition of religion that rejects a general concept of religion as advocated by Tillich. On this basis, a reformulation of a systematic theology of culture can then be indicated in the concluding third section. Such a reformulation takes up Tillich's intention, but gives it not only a different justification, but also a different direction.

1. Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture and its Revelation-Theological Foundations

From the very beginning, Paul Tillich's theology is concerned with establishing the possibility of a religious interpretation of reality. The writings from the time before the First World War, his two dissertations on Schelling as well as the *Systematic Theology* of 1913 already elaborate such a theological program. This theological program is developed by means of a recourse to the speculative philosophies of Fichte and Schelling in order to give an epistemological-critical grounding to the so-called modern-positive theology. Schlatter's empirical theology, which starts from the realist assumption that God as the cause and unity of the world always already underlies everything concrete

in it,⁴ transfers Tillich into a speculative conception of theology that understands the relation of God and the world as the relation between absolute and particular spirit. The universe is the process in which God grasps himself in the world he has created and at the same time distinguishes himself from it. Tillich transformed this speculative conception during the First World War. The most striking difference from the pre-war theology is that now the present as well as the concrete in history become the focus of Tillich's theology, and the speculative framework of a history of the absolute is dropped.⁵ The first comprehensive elaboration of this new theological conception is found in the draft *Justification and Doubt*.⁶ Tillich had written it in 1919 in order to introduce himself to the theological faculty of the University of Berlin, to which he rehabilitated himself after the war.⁷

What is the draft *Justification and Doubt* about? In this text, Tillich elaborates a foundation of theology that aims to accommodate the modern culture based on autonomy. The keywords justification and doubt stand for this. "It is to be shown that the principle of Protes-

⁴ Cf. SCHLATTER, A. *Das christliche Dogma*. Zweite Auflage. Stuttgart: Calwer Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1923. Cf. also the continuation of Schlatter's program in LÜTGERT, W. *Schöpfung und Offenbarung. Eine Theologie des ersten Artikels*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1934.

⁵ Cf. TILLICH, P. *Theodicee*. 1. und 2. Version. In: STURM, E. (Hg.). **Ergänzungs- und Nachlaßbände zu den Gesammelten Werken von Paul Tillich**. Band X: Religion, Kultur, Gesellschaft. Unveröffentlichte Texte aus der deutschen Zeit (1908-1933). Erster Teil. Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 1999, p. 101-106 (1. Version), p. 107-113 (2. Version). In this connection, cf. WITTEKIND, F. „Allein durch Glauben“. Tillichs sinntheoretische Umformulierung des Rechtfertigungsverständnisses 1919. In: DANZ, C.; SCHÜßLER, W. (Hg.). **Religion – Kultur – Gesellschaft**. Der frühe Tillich im Spiegel neuer Texte (1919-1920). Tillich-Studien: Band 20. Wien; Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2008, p. 39-65, especially, p. 46-52.

⁶ Cf. TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*. (1919). 1. Version. In: STURM, E. (Hg.). **Ergänzungs- und Nachlaßbände zu den Gesammelten Werken von Paul Tillich**. Band X: Religion, Kultur, Gesellschaft. Unveröffentlichte Texte aus der deutschen Zeit (1908-1933). Erster Teil, p. 128-185; TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*. (1919). 2. Version. In: STURM, E. (Hg.). **Ergänzungs- und Nachlaßbände zu den Gesammelten Werken von Paul Tillich**. Band X: Religion, Kultur, Gesellschaft. Unveröffentlichte Texte aus der deutschen Zeit (1908-1933). Erster Teil, p. 185-249.

⁷ Cf. STURM, E. *An der engen Pforte der historischen Methode vorbei... Paul Tillichs Habilitation in Halle (1916) und seine Umhabilitierungen nach Berlin (1919) und Marburg (1924)*. In: DANZ, C.; DUMAS, M.; SCHÜßLER, W.; STENGER, M. A.; STURM, E. (Hg.). **Internationales Jahrbuch für die Tillich-Forschung**. Band 10: Ethics and Eschatology. Berlin; Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2015, p. 273-331.

tantism contains in itself a moment through the unfolding of which it comes into unity with a spiritual life built on autonomy.”⁸ Critical subjectivity, that is, the knowledge that every content is posited and produced by human and consequently can be taken back, becomes part of the theological foundation. Thus, the critique of religion is included in the foundation of theology. Every thought of God, Tillich assumes, is a thought produced by human. How does he now construct his theological foundation, which on the one hand takes up the religion-critical objections of modernity and on the other hand overcomes them?

Tillich bases his post-World War I theology on a redefinition of consciousness that functions as a general foundational structure. This means that consciousness as a reflexive and self-referential disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*) is the origin and basis of all theoretical and practical realities in consciousness. Tillich refers to consciousness, which is the precondition and basis of all concrete acts of consciousness, as the unconditioned and defines it more specifically as meaning.⁹ Thus, the unconditioned already underlies all reality and every reference of consciousness to reality as well as every individual in it. As an infinite reflexivity of consciousness to which all concrete determinations and contents owe themselves, the unconditioned is itself indeterminate and unrepresentable. It is, in a strict sense, transcendent and permanently distinguished from the world. There is no way from the conditioned to the unconditioned, although it, the unconditioned, always already underlies the reality of the world. The unconditioned is, as it is said in the writings of the 1920s, at the same time ground and abyss.

From the world there is no way to grasp the unconditioned. For all contents of the consciousness are, as contents, products of consciousness and, therefore, not the unconditioned, which is neither a content nor an object. The unconditioned can only be disclosed to human. Tillich determines the contingent disclosedness of the general basic function of consciousness in the individual consciousness as religion. Its general determination is to be an act of “intention” (*Meinen*) or “directedness” (*Richtung*) towards the unconditioned. How is Tillich’s concept of reli-

⁸ TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, p. 187.

⁹ Cf. TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, p. 169f.

gion, religion being intention of the unconditioned, to be understood? Religion arises in human by the fact that the unconditioned, which is already laid out in consciousness, is disclosed to him. This is bound to an act of reflection in the self-relation of consciousness, which is itself undetermined. Only in this act is the unconditioned given in consciousness. Tillich explicitly rules out religion as a particular form and function of consciousness. His concept of religion aims precisely at overcoming the idea that religion is a special form in culture among other cultural forms. Thus, it only remains to understand the accessibility of the unconditioned in individual consciousness as a negation of the particular consciousness or the particular cultural functions of consciousness. Thus the revelation-theological foundations of Tillich's concept of religion are named. Religion, as directedness towards the unconditioned, arises in human as a contingent act in the self-relation of consciousness. In this act, which is cannot be produced by human, the general foundational function of consciousness is disclosed in individual consciousness. Since the unconditioned is itself indeterminate and, therefore, cannot be any content or object, it can only present itself as a negation of the contentual determination of consciousness.

Tillich's concept of religion – religion as intention of the unconditioned – results from this structure. The unconditioned, precisely because it itself is no content, can only be represented as a negation of the contentual determinations of consciousness. With the concept of religion sketched so far, the foundation of the theological principle, which takes doubt into itself, is derived. For faith, as Tillich states, is the affirmation of the absolute paradox, i.e., as we have seen, the grasping of the unconditioned as the precondition of all acts of consciousness, which can only be represented as critical negation, i.e., as doubt.¹⁰ Doubt, which has become reflexive, does not abolish standing in truth, but it is the form of how the unconditioned alone can be grasped. This, as it were, justification-theological construction of faith has consequences. I would like to mention two of these consequences before we can turn, in the next session, to the systematic problems stemming from Tillich's theology of culture.

¹⁰ Cf. TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, p. 218-221.

The first aspect to be mentioned concerns the relationship between religion and culture as well as the resulting version of the contents of religion. As mentioned, religion is for Tillich neither a special function of consciousness nor a special act. It is determined solely by the intention to be directedness towards the unconditioned. That is, it can be represented by all contents of consciousness, since all religious contents are only representations of the event of disclosedness of consciousness in regards to the unconditioned already claimed by it. Thus, every apprehension of the reflexive disclosedness of the unconditioned in consciousness, which as representation is always an image produced by consciousness, is culture.¹¹ In contrast to cultural consciousness, however, these images become religious in the religious consciousness by the fact that they, as representations of the disclosedness of consciousness, express this very disclosedness only as a negation. For the religious objects, i.e., God, this means that they are constructed by Tillich in a self-referential way: they represent and structure in consciousness the reflexive disclosedness of consciousness. By referring to God, religious consciousness refers to itself, i.e., to its unconditional dimension. This is precisely the content of Tillich's formula of the "God above God," which forms, already in *Justification and Doubt*, the key concept of his theology.¹² Tillich's formula of the God above God does not refer to an actual God beyond the images of God. Rather, it designates the reflexive structure of the act of faith that is represented in it. At the same time, Tillich's formula designates the content of his theory of symbols, which he did not elaborate until the 1920s.¹³ Fundamental to Tillich's understanding of symbols is not their referential character, that is, that symbols refer to something else. Rather, the symbol describes the position of consciousness in relation to its contents. Consciousness, as it were, is itself already distinguished by symbolicity.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, p. 225.

¹² Cf. TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, p. 219.

¹³ Tillich already uses the concept of symbol in the first version of *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, but it is not a relevant basic concept here. In the second version of *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, he then also no longer used the concept of symbol. Cf. TILLICH, P. *Rechtfertigung und Zweifel*, p. 172.

¹⁴ This is the content of Tillich's statement advanced in the first volume of the *Systematic Theology*, i.e., that God, as being-itself, "is a nonsymbolic statement." Cf. TILLICH, P.

Secondly, we have to take another look at Tillich's revelation-theological construction of religion. In order to overcome the opposition of religion and culture, the event of the reflexive disclosedness of the unconditioned in individual consciousness cannot be a particular or determined act, but only an indeterminate one. How must this act be imagined, in which there is a transition from culture – which, by its turn, is implicitly based on the unconditioned – to religion as an explicit intention of the unconditioned? For if in this transition the unconditioned is to be made accessible to consciousness, then consciousness must have a knowledge of it. Otherwise, it could not even know that the unconditioned is not representable. Tillich, however, tends to pass over the question of how religion arises in the individual by answering it by pointing out that the unconditioned is already given in every consciousness.¹⁵ In doing so, however, he passes over a fundamental problem of his construction with silence. This problem is not really solved even in the further development of his theology from the 1920s up to the American *Systematic Theology*.

What changes in Tillich's revelation-theological foundation of theology between the early draft *Justification and Doubt* and *Systematic Theology* is above all the introduction of the distinction between foundational revelation (*Grundoffenbarung*) and salvation revelation (*Heilsoffenbarung*) in the lecture *Justification and Doubt* of 1924.¹⁶ With it he differentiates the concept of revelation in order to be able to better account for its concreteness. By foundational revelation is to be understood a general disclosedness of consciousness, which, however, remains ambiguous. The foundational revelation is completed in the Christological revelation of salvation, in which the ambiguity of the

Systematic Theology. Volume I: Reason and Revelation, Being and God. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, p. 238f. What is meant here is the structural description of the inner relation of consciousness and the being given in consciousness.

¹⁵ Cf. WITTEKIND, F. Grund- und Heilsoffenbarung. Zur Ausformung der Christologie Tillichs in der Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Barth. In: DANZ, C.; SCHÜBLER, W.; STURM, E. (Hg.). **Internationales Jahrbuch für die Tillich-Forschung.** Band 6: Jesus of Nazareth and the New Being in History. Berlin; Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2013, p. 89-119, especially p. 96f.

¹⁶ Cf. TILLICH, P. Rechtfertigung und Zweifel. (1924). In: ALBRECHT, R. (Hg.). **Gesammelte Werke.** Band VIII: Offenbarung und Glaube. Schriften zur Theologie II. Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1970, p. 85-100.

foundational revelation is overcome by the fact that the consciousness of revelation itself becomes reflexive. This means that the reflexive disclosedness of the unconditioned in consciousness, which can only present itself as negation of the determination of consciousness in it, is itself to be negated again. Even in this further development of his theology, Tillich holds to the general structure of the concept of revelation that we have discussed. What is important about this distinction, I would like to point out, is that Tillich dropped the terminology of foundational revelation and salvation revelation in the 1930s in the United States and replaced it with the dialectical interrelation of question and answer.¹⁷ The background of the later method of correlation, as it is significant for the late *Systematic Theology* and its structure, is the concept of revelation.

2. From the General Concept of Religion to the Diversity of the Religious

In his theology of culture, as we have seen, Tillich starts from a theological understanding of revelation or – in Tillich’s own terminology – a metalogical or theonomic understanding of religion. In religion, i.e., in the directedness towards the unconditioned, the general basic structure of consciousness is disclosed to the individual consciousness. This disclosedness is realized, in consciousness, as a negation of the contentual determinations produced by consciousness, since the unconditioned itself is not representable. Religion and culture are connected with this. Religion is the explicit knowledge of that presupposition which is already given and claimed in all consciousness, and so therefore also in cultural consciousness, viz., the unconditioned. In the interest of the generality of religion, Tillich vehemently refuses to determine the content of the happening of religion itself. This is determined solely by its intentionality, namely to be directedness towards the unconditioned. As intentionality, religion is not directed toward any object or content. For it consists precisely in the negation of every content, given that,

¹⁷ Cf. TILLICH, P. What Is Wrong with the “Dialectic” Theology? *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1935, p. 127-145; TILLICH, P. Natural and Revealed Religion. In: DANZ, C.; SCHÜBLER, W.; STURM, E. (Hg.). **Paul Tillich**. *Ausgewählte Texte*. Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 2008, p. 265-273.

as already mentioned, the unconditioned as the basis of all determined contents is itself no content.

Tillich's concept of religion, as we have tried to make it clear to us, forms the basis of his theology of culture. At the same time, however, this concept of religion is confronted with problems that make it in need of revision given the plural culture of the 21st century. There are three problems in particular that confront Tillich's grounding of theology. First, Tillich holds to a general or universal concept of religion. Wherever religion arises in human, it consists in the reflexive disclosedness of consciousness, i.e., in the directedness towards the unconditioned, or – as the later formula reads – in that which concerns us unconditionally. Just like Jesus Christ, the symbol bearers of other religions are only illustrations of the general structure of religion, which underlies every historical religion. Secondly, connected with this concept of religion is that religion, as a directedness towards the unconditional, endows a new unity of the differentiated, fragmented modern culture. This new unity of culture lies below the opposites of the juxtaposed cultural systems like economy, law, politics, art, etc. Religion can only create a new unity of culture if it is not itself a special form of culture next to others. This is the reason why Tillich dissolves an autonomous religion as a form of its own. For its generality can only be held on to if it itself is not determined, consequently undetermined. And finally, Tillich's concept of religion leads thirdly to the fact that non-religious ways of life are actually not possible at all. The unconditioned, as we have seen, underlies all consciousness. If someone is not religious or claims to be so, then his own self-understanding is deficient, since he has not come to an adequate understanding of himself. Because a disclosedness of the consciousness and with it a self-understanding of the human being exists only as religion.

Such a general concept of religion, as Tillich based his theology of culture on, is no longer convincing in a plural culture and society. For, first, a general concept of religion cancels out the diversity and plurality of historical religions. All religions have an identical, invariant core; only their surface, i.e., the symbolic forms in which they present themselves, are different. But these symbolic forms are insignificant as a shell compared to the actual religious core, which is identical. Secondly,

such a model of unity that grounds Tillich's theology of culture, and the claim connected with which that aims to give a new justification for the unity of the differentiated culture, is under the conditions of present culture and society mere romanticism. And finally, thirdly, in a plural culture characterized by high-grade differentiations, the assertion of an anthropological necessity of religion, as constructed by Tillich, is a mere non-verifiable postulate. It serves only to assert the generality of religion and leads to the fact that non-religious self-understandings cannot be recognized as justified modes of self-descriptions by theology. But if that was the case, then theology would also not be able to recognize the modern, plural world.

In order to hold on to Tillich's idea of a theology of culture and to continue it under the conditions of the 21st century, as has become clear, his general concept of religion must be dropped, as well as his construction of religion. Unlike Tillich, religion is to be assumed as an autonomous form in culture, which has differentiated itself as a separate realm in the process of cultural evolution. Religion is thus not a component of the *conditio humana* or of the general basic structure of consciousness, as in Tillich, but a contingent product of the process of cultural differentiation. As such, it is not necessary for human being and his understanding of himself or his self-understanding. This means that a general concept of religion is to be abandoned by systematic theology and the concept of religion is to be limited to the Christian religion. The theological concept of religion serves to conceptually grasp and determine Christianity as religion. By renouncing a general concept of religion, the possibility is created to recognize that other religions understand religion differently than Christianity. Thus, it is not a matter of distinguishing only Christianity as a religion or of understanding it as a true and proper religion, but just the other way around, to include in theology and to acknowledge that what is religion is already differently determined in the different religions.¹⁸ Each religion is a religion *sui generis* and not merely the historical particularization of a general underlying essence that they allegedly have in common.

¹⁸ Cf. DANZ, C. Religious Diversity and the Concept of Religion. Theology and Religious Pluralism. *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, Band. 62, Heft 1, 2020, p. 111-113.

Now how is religion to be determined in contrast to Tillich? My proposal is to understand the Christian religion as an independent form of communication in culture, which knows about itself as religion and communicates religion in its contentual communication.¹⁹ Christian religion is an event involved in communication, which consists in the religious use of communication by people. It arises solely in communication and not through preconditions that are given outside of it, such as a religious disposition in the subject or an already existing religious object. Constitutive for the Christian religion is an interrelation of three structural elements: first, it depends on Christian-religious communication, i.e., the memory of Jesus Christ, which must already exist in culture; second, Christian religion depends on the understanding appropriation (*verstehende Aneignung*) of the memory of Jesus Christ; and third, on the symbolic articulation of the appropriated memory of Jesus Christ. As a religion, Christian religion arises alone from all three moments together. It cannot be traced back or justified on one of these elements. Only by people taking up the Christian religious communication as religion and using it for the representation of religion, the Christian religion exists. This depends exclusively on the use that people make of the communication. Religious contents and a religious subject therefore exist only in the Christian religion, but not as preconditions from which it could be derived or justified.

With the outlined concept of religion, which refers to the Christian religion, the redefinition of religion as a non-derivable act in the self-relationship of consciousness, undertaken by Tillich and the theology of the early 20th century, is taken up and continued, in that, on the one hand, Tillich's general basic structure has been dropped and, on the other hand, the specificity of religion is not attached to its act alone. In its place, an understanding of the Christian religion as a self-referential, self-aware, and in itself structured communication event takes place. This concept of religion has to be developed by systematic theology. What this means for a continuation of Tillich's theology of culture, we must now finally take a look at.

¹⁹ Cf. DANZ, C. **Gottes Geist**. Eine Pneumatologie. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2019.

3. Systematic Theology as the Science of the Christian Religion in the Plural Culture of Modernity

Already Tillich was of the opinion that it is not the task of systematic theology to establish the Christian religion. Rather, it is the task of theology to unfold the Christian religion.²⁰ Christian religion, if it is to be taken up, cannot be justified by presuppositions which are given outside of it. It has its justification, validity and truth in itself, namely in the transparent and self-referential use of the religious memory of Jesus Christ for the communication of religion. This inner functioning of the Christian religion as religion or the knowledge of the Christian religion to be religion is the subject as well as the object of systematic theology. It describes the Christian religion from its self-view, that is, from the perspective of those who practice the Christian religion.

But theology is not itself religion.²¹ Fundamental for modern Protestant theology – also for Tillich – is that theology as a science distinguishes itself from the religion to which it refers. The distinction between theology and religion is a distinction which is made in theology in order to release religion from theological tutelage over its autonomy. When systematic theology refers to the Christian religion, it can do so only against the background of the distinction between the two. This means that the concept of religion in systematic theology is a theological construct. Theology constructs in itself an image of the Christian religion, which at the same time it distinguishes itself from. Only in this way can theology be an autonomous science and take into account in itself the autonomy of religion. Both are revoked if theology understands itself as an outflow or extension of religion into science or as the truth of religion. Systematic theology constructs Christian religion in its own right. It cannot refer to religion in any other way. But it constructs the self-view of the Christian religion, its inner functioning as religion. What does this mean for the task of systematic theology?

²⁰ Cf. TILLICH, P. **Systematic Theology**. Volume I: Reason and Revelation, Being and God, p. 10.

²¹ Cf. DANZ, C. Theologie und Religion. Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Unterscheidung. In: HEIL, U.; SCHELLENBERG, A. (Hg.). **Theologie als Streitkultur**. Wiener Jahrbuch für Theologie. Band 13. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage; University of Vienna Press, 2021, p. 139-154.

Systematic theology describes the self-view of the Christian religion by constructing it as a self-referential and in itself structured communication event that knows itself. As a religion, Christian religion arises, as already mentioned, in that the religious memory of Jesus Christ, handed down in culture, is appropriated by people in an understanding way as religion and is used to represent religion. Exactly this, the functioning as religion, symbolizes the contents of the Christian religion in it. The Holy Spirit represents in the Christian religion its lasting dependence on the memory of Jesus Christ, God represents the binding of the Christian religion to the understanding of communication, and Christ represents the necessity of the symbolic representation of the Christian religion. The representational contents of the Christian religion, which exist as religious contents in religion alone, thus do not have a representational function, but a reflexive one. They symbolize in the Christian religion how it functions as religion and is passed down in history – namely, only in such a way that it hangs as religion on the understanding appropriation and articulation of the handed down religious memory of Jesus Christ.

In order to be able to grasp the Christian religion theologically, systematic theology must describe how the Christian religion comes into being together with its contents in Christian-religious communication. For religion cannot be sufficiently recognized by its contents. Religious contents such as God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit can be used in communication at any time in a non-religious sense, namely historically, aesthetically, politically, and so on. The religious quality of the communicated contents depends solely on their use and not on the contents as such. This was already seen by Tillich, for he ties the transition from the cultural use of communication to religious communication to an act in consciousness. But the general foundational function of consciousness tapped in this act, which Tillich presupposes, is to be abandoned. For its function consists solely in asserting the universality of religion.

Rather, Christian religion comes into being in that the handed down memory of Jesus Christ is used religiously by people, that is, religion is meant, intended by it. This means that the communicated contents in religion lose their “cultural” meaning – this is negated, as it is said by Tillich – and thereby become the expression of religion.

Consequently, the religiousness of the Christian religion does not depend on its contentual statements, but on its religious use. Nevertheless, the content of the Christian religion, i.e., the memory of Jesus Christ as it is transmitted by the Bible, does not become meaningless. For as a Christian religion, it can be recognized solely by its contentual statements. This is the function of the Bible in the Christian religion. Only by being tied to the medially conveyed memory of Jesus Christ is Christian-religious communication identifiable in culture. However, the fact that it is a religion is not based on its contentual statements, but exclusively on the religious use of these statements, that is, on their religious meaning. What does this mean for the project of a theology of culture?

A theology of culture can no longer be concerned, as it was with Tillich, with providing the true justification of culture or even a justification or basis for cultural and religious pluralism.²² In a plural and differentiated culture, no cultural system is able to do this, not even religion. Rather, a theology of culture must make it possible to recognize cultural and religious pluralism. However, this is only possible if it limits the Christian religion to itself. This also applies to the idea of God. The latter is not to be postulated as the general and overriding basis of culture and religious diversity, but is to be limited to the Christian religion itself, which presents itself in the Trinitarian God. The otherness and autonomy of culture can be taken into account by systematic theology only if it does not assert Christian religion as the true and proper basis of culture or pluralism. Theology refers only to Christian religion. However, this is lived in a plural culture and society. This means that at any time in the culture traditional religious contents are used in a non-religious sense. But in the same way, conversely, the Christian religion constantly incorporates cultural content into Christian-religious communication. In this way, these contents lose their cultural meaning. For in the Christian religion into which these contents are incorporated, they function as an expression and representation of religion.

²² This is the suggestion of Christoph Schwöbel following Paul Tillich. Cf. SCHWÖBEL, C. *Glaube und Kultur. Gedanken zur Idee einer Theologie der Kultur. Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, Band. 38, Heft 2, 1996, p. 137-154.

The Christian religion exists in history only as a self-description that is subject to permanent change. This takes place in reference back to the memory of Jesus Christ and its reinterpretation in a highly differentiated culture, which helps to decide what is a plausible contemporary self-description of Christianity as a religion. In this process of self-description does not lie a fixed identity of the Christian religion that remains constant as a core through the changing times while the outer shell changes. Such a view of the Christian religion is an abstraction. Rather, Christian religion changes in history as a whole, just as its understanding of itself as a religion also changes. Christianity becomes different in every time and in every cultural context. Its identity consists solely in the reference back to Jesus Christ and the religious use of his memory. To discuss this, that is, to make possible the change in the self-description of the Christian religion and a recognition of plurality, is the task of a systematic theology of culture in the 21st century.²³

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²³ Cf. DANZ, C. Nochmals: Monistischer Pluralismus oder pluralismusoffene Theologie? Eine Duplik auf Perry Schmidt-Leukel. **Theologische Rundschau**, Band 86, Heft 1, 2021, p. 106-119.

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Reactions and Questions to the Lecturer

Fábio Henrique Abreu²⁴

Since Professor Fábio's reaction is a true article, it is being published in another archive submitted in this journal. We reproduce here only part of the summary: Danz's lecture, entitled "Theology, Religion, Culture. Reflections on the Task of Systematic Theology following Paul Tillich," brings not only an exegetical exposition of Tillich's theology of culture, but also a sturdy criticism regarding the foundation of his concept of religion in the face of the religious pluralism of modern democratic societies. The thesis presented by Danz can be summarized in three points: 1) the transcendental foundation of Tillich's concept of religion makes his theology incapable of dealing with religious pluralism; 2) given that the academic concept of religion is a product of neo-Protestantism, the concept of religion must be restricted to the Christian religion; 3) finally, the function of the concept of religion within the theological system lies in its ability to conceptually apprehend and determine Christianity as a religion. Based on the critique of the foundation of the concept of religion developed by Tillich, Danz proposes a new concept of religion in the perspective of a "self-referential system of religious communication." Constitutive to the self-referential system of religious communication is the concept of "*verstehende Aneignung*," or "understanding appropriation," which, in turn, can only occur within the system of religious communication. The text that follows is an attempt, and while still incipient and intuitive, it offers a rather "suspicious" approach to the theological system proposed by Danz. The first part is intended for a comprehensive synthesis of the substantive content of the lecture given. The second part presents initial considerations and questions regarding the foundations of the proposed new theological system.

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Jonas Roos²⁵:

First of all, thank you very much, Prof. Dr. Danz, for the opportunity of debating your thought-provoking text, and thank you, my colleagues, especially Dr. Fábio Abreu, for this invitation. As we heard, from your presentation, Prof. Danz, you seek both thinking in a line that is indebted to Tillich, and facing specific issues of our plural 21st century. This challenge is related specifically to the difficulty of maintaining a general concept of religion, as Tillich does, in the face of the plurality of our 21st Century. I quote from your text:

Tillich's own foundation of a theology of culture on the basis of a general concept of religion cannot be continued under the conditions of a pluralistic culture and society. Rather, it must be replaced by a conception that pays more attention to the differences and distinctions of religions. Only in this way can a theology of culture be elaborated under the conditions of the present times, which then, of course, also acquires a quite different function from that developed by Tillich himself.

I think that when talking about *a general concept of religion* regarding Tillich, we must keep in mind that, as we know, Tillich always tried to think in terms of a system. Even if his system is far from being something like the Hegelian system – where, at least according to Kierkegaard's critique, concepts are articulated by necessity, what generates a qualitative difference from existence and actuality –, even if Tillich's idea is far from that, the way he approaches a problem will always have implications for many other problems or issues. The consequence of this is that a change in one point is obviously reflected in many others. This necessarily raises the question of how far it remains possible to keep thinking on Tillichian terms while dropping some of his concepts. What do we gain and what do we lose in following this path? Of course, this question I raise does not imply that one should not try doing this.

In relation to thinking a concept of religion, in contrast to Tillich, Prof. Danz states:

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My proposal is to understand the Christian religion as an independent form of communication in culture, which knows about itself as religion and communicates religion in its contentual communication.

It is inherent to the role of theology to take into consideration our contextual problems. When thinking theologically taking into consideration the situation of some European countries, for example, it is necessary to deal with a large and growing number of people who declare themselves as atheists. For these contexts, a general concept of religion can be something difficult to manage. But it is of course not less true that in our Brazilian context, our challenge is very much focused on thinking religion in the face of *idolatry* and the *demonic*. This is not a new problem, but it certainly has become much more intense in Brazil in the last years. Thinking religion in this context in the light of Tillich's *Protestant principle*, for example, has been not only fruitful, but necessary. The same can be said about the concepts of *idolatry* or the *demonic*. However, here we have to ask: up to which point these concepts are dependent on Tillich's general concept of religion? Can we drop his concept of religion and keep these important concepts in the same way and same function? Are not they dependent on ideas that are correlate to Tillich's concept of religion, such as *ultimate concern*? Related to that, if religion is thought of as *communication*, what criteria does it provide for a critique of religion?

Finally, if we replace Tillich's concept of religion and, "In its place, an understanding of the Christian religion as a self-referential, self-aware and in it self structured communication event takes place," to what extent can Christianity maintain its prophetic role not only for an internal and self-referential discourse, but in relation to society as a whole?

Eduardo Gross²⁶:

A general concept of religion has the disadvantage of allowing an escape from history (albeit this does not seem to be Tillich's intention, cf. his use of "principle", which denotes a generalizing concept

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that has historical grounding). But it also enables to recognize the limitations of particular historical conceptions. How does a linguistic-historical conception propose to avoid a self-sufficient traditional particularism? A concept of religion akin to one's own religion, if not related to other concepts of religion, does not risk becoming a naturalization of self-sufficiency? Is not the encounter with the other – also the other religion – a necessary step in the process of self-understanding? Moreover, for a communication process between different groups (religious understandings, cultures) a common ground is a presupposition. Would it perhaps be possible to take Tillich's general understanding of religion as a starting point or as a suggestion in order to try to find such a common ground? And was this not in some sense Tillich's own intention with his so called "substantial" definition, as long as his thought does not aim to remain a simple a-historical point of view?

Autonomy of spheres or realms is a relative comfortable conception for Protestantism; but it is not recognized by all religions and it is also necessarily restricted by law (religions do not have autonomy to induce illegal procedures, unless the law allows such exceptions: for example, polygamy, drug consumption, forced marriage, death penalty, which are actual practices in given religions). This shows that in the idea of autonomy of spheres there was already a common presupposition of what religion should be. So, even in a modern liberal society, the autonomy of spheres is not unlimited, because the claim of religious autonomous authority in certain fields is not accepted. The question is, again, how to find a common ground for a dialogue between different groups, as long as the understanding of what should be autonomous – or religious – is not simply resolved by a general presupposition of independent realms. Therefore, a general conception of what religion is remains necessary for a practical linguistic relation between different religions and secularized people.

Joe Marçal dos Santos²⁷:

Thank you very much for your lecture, Prof. Christian Danz. May you comment what would be the relevance of the concept of religion “as communication” for two different but related academic contexts: 1) for the debate on religious pluralism in a dialogical key; 2) for the approaches of pluralism of what we call “religions” in the perspective of the science of religion?

Systematic Theology of Christian Religious Communication. A Rejoinder²⁸

Christian Danz²⁹

First and foremost, I would like to thank Fábio Henrique Abreu, Eduardo Gross, Jonas Roos, and Joe Marçal dos Santos for the thorough study of my paper *Theology, Religion, Culture. Reflections on Systematic Theology following Paul Tillich*. Their questions and their criticism consistently aim at central problems that require detailed discussion. In addition to my interpretation of Tillich’s theology, it is especially the concept of religion, and the connected consequences for theology and the science of religion, that have provoked their criticism. This also affects the relationship between theology and religion as well as the position and significance of religious experience. In particular, they objected to my suggestion to renounce a universal concept of religion in systematic theology and to replace it with a description of the Christian religion. In order to comprehensively answer their questions raised,

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²⁸ DANZ, C. „Systematische Theologie der christlich-religiösen Kommunikation. Antwort“. Translated from the German by Fábio Henrique Abreu.

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which depend on complex presuppositions, a far-reaching investigation is required. Of course, such a task cannot be undertaken here. I shall therefore limit myself to tackling their questions against the background of a theological-historical classification of my proposal for a systematic theology of Christian-religious communication. Such a procedure gives me the opportunity to situate this concept of a systematic theology more clearly in the history of theology and thereby make its systematic foundations more readily perceivable. The proposed redetermination (*Neubestimmung*) of systematic theology results from the history of the development of modern Protestant theology, to which the concept is related. On this basis, the relationship between scientific systematic theology and religion, as well as the understanding of Christian religion as communication, to which the queries refer, can be outlined. I would like to conclude with a few remarks on the theological perception of religious and cultural pluralism, which result from my version of the concept of religion. It will be seen that it neither entails the consequence of a self-isolation of theology with respect to other religions, nor loses its critical capacity. The proposed concept aims precisely at an appropriate consideration of religious and cultural pluralism in theology. Such a task, however, neither excludes criticism nor amounts to an isolation of theology and Christian religion.

1. Systematic Theology of Religious Communication Against the Background of the History of Protestant Theology in the Modern Era

Every systematic theology must provide information about how it relates to and continues the history of the development of theology. This is also true for a systematic theology of Christian-religious communication. It not only connects itself with the development of systematic theology in the German-speaking world since the Enlightenment, but also assumes it and continues it. According to Fábio Henrique Abreu,³⁰ there is no question of a break with the doctrinal tradition. However, every presentation of the

³⁰ Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach. *Revista Eletrônica Correlatio*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2021, p. 147.

history of the development of theology is a construction that starts from a determined point of view and tries to make it understandable from this development. What is the history of the development of Protestant theology since the Enlightenment?

Against the background of epistemological and historical criticism of the foundations of the old Protestant understanding of theology, Protestant theology could only maintain itself as a science at universities by transforming its methodical foundations. The epistemological critique of the Enlightenment dissolved God as a given object of theology, and the historical criticism of the Bible dissolved the scriptural principle of the old Protestantism (*das Schriftprinzip des Altprotestantismus*). Thus, Protestant theology was faced with the task of redetermining its foundations. In complex processes related to the context of the emergence of the modern sciences around 1800, the concept of religion replaced both the idea of God and the scriptural principle. In the process, following Immanuel Kant's critique of reason, consciousness-theoretical concepts of religion have been elaborated, which anchored religion in the faculty structure of consciousness (*Vermögensstruktur des Bewusstseins*). As religion is part of the faculty structure of consciousness, its universality and necessity (*Allgemeinheit und Notwendigkeit*) is established and derived. This universal religion underlies every historical religion. Every historical religion is based on this universal religion. The religions of this world are historical particularizations of this universal humane religion, which is itself invariant. Systematic theology is now science, in that it relates the Christian religion to this universal basic construction and understands the contents of the Christian religion as its expression. The object of theology is thus no longer God per se, but God as the presentation of religious consciousness. Thus, the old objectual (*gegenständliche*) understanding of theology of the old Protestantism is replaced by a reflexive one. The emergence of the specialized sciences (*Fachwissenschaften*) is accompanied by the fact that theology as a science distinguishes itself from religion in order to release the latter into autonomy. While religion is practiced by individuals, and is therefore necessarily different, theology elaborates an image of the Christian religion. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, there has been controversy as to how theology related to the religion from which theology distinguishes itself. Should theology take its contents into account, or

should it construct religion on its own, as it were? The diverse tendencies of Protestant theology in the nineteenth century differ on this question. What they have in common, however, is that they understand systematic theology as a science whose object is the universal human religion, which finds its adequate expression in the Christian religion.

Against the background of the increasing knowledge of religions as well as the advancing differentiation of culture and the scientific system in the nineteenth century, there was a further transformation of the understanding of theology in German-speaking Protestant theology around 1900. New theologies emerged that set themselves apart critically from the preceding theologies, especially during and after the First World War. In the history of theology, the classification of these new theologies is controversial. The interpretations oscillate between the extremes of a return of theology to its proper cause and a departure of theology from the modern scientific system. Both interpretations, however, are as abstract as they are wrong. It is more constructive to understand the new theologies emerging around 1900, as a continuation of the basic debates of a scientific theology. As a result of the differentiation of the scientific system, the sciences of religion, such as sociology of religion, psychology of religion, ethnology, etc., which are independent of theology, have been established. Accordingly, theology has also become an autonomous science that developed its own view of the Christian religion. The consequence of such transformations is that religion is no longer considered the object of theology, as it had been in the nineteenth century, but theology itself has become the object of the theological science. With the determination of the content of the Christian religion, systematic theology constructs itself as a science.

The most significant aspect of the new theologies is that they dissolve a concept of religion anchored in the faculties of consciousness as the foundation of systematic theology. This applies not only to the dialectical theologies of Karl Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, and Rudolf Bultmann, but also to other theologians such as Paul Tillich or Paul Althaus. Religion, according to their new view, exists only as an actual act (*Vollzug*), and not as an annex (*Anlage*) in the structure of consciousness or a *conditio humana* which is independent of its use. Religion is bound to its act, and the knowledge of being bound to an underivable act forms a component of itself. Thus, in the new theologies, religion is subtracted

from the universal transcendental basic structure of culture, that is, consciousness and its faculties, and is redetermined as an act. The task of systematic theology is to describe the specificity of the Christian religion from its self-view. The immediate recourse to the reality of God and his revelation, the new emphasis on God's transcendence and his permanent otherness in relation to the world, which characterizes these theologies, has a very specific function. It serves the redescription of the Christian religion as an act that originates underivably in the human being, is bound to this act, and knows about its act-binding. In the new theologies of the first half of the twentieth century, too, a reflexive understanding of religion remains. The contents of the Christian religion do not refer to any objects. They also do not refer to a religion already given in humans as a disposition or as an a priori constitution, but to a self-referential act, which presents itself in its contents and refers to itself.

Further theological developments in the second half of the twentieth century stuck to this new understanding of theology. After the Second World War, however, there have also been shifts in the construction of theology. These consist primarily in the fact that, since the 1950s, the act-dependent concepts of religion (*vollzugsgebundenen Religionsbegriffen*) have been required to devise a theological justification. This becomes visible in the debates about the historical Jesus, which resumed after the Second World War. These debates do not concern a historical presupposition of the Christian religion, but a theological one. In this way, justifications of the Christian religion in a revelation of God that precedes it, now move into the focus of systematic theology. These justifications, however, which are elaborated very differently by the individual theologians, remain circular. They postulate – unlike in the first half of the twentieth century – a component of the circular structure of the Christian religion as its presupposition. Alone, its circular structure cannot be resolved unilaterally.

With this, the development in the history of theology, to which my proposal for a redetermination of systematic theology refers, has thus been traced to such an extent that we can now turn to my proposal.

2. Systematic Theology as Science of the Christian Religion

The proposal to understand systematic theology as a science of the Christian religion builds on the history of development of Protestant theology presented, and takes it further. Both the conversion to a concept of religion, as undertaken by Protestant theology in the nineteenth century, and the criticism of a universal faculty-theoretical (*vermögenstheoretischen*) concept of religion from the early twentieth century are assumed. As a science, systematic theology refers neither to a religious object nor to a religious subject. Both are components of the Christian religion. The concept of religion is thus retained in such a way that a universal anthropological concept of religion is abandoned. At the same time, this proposal assumes the religious-scientific criticism of a universal concept of religion, as it has been put forward by structuralism and post-colonialism since the 1980s.³¹ The concept of religion in theology refers to the Christian religion.

Consequently, there can be no question of a break with modern Protestant theology. On the contrary, modern Protestant theological tradition is assumed and its problems are continued. However, it is not sufficient to define religion as a mere underivable reflexive act, as in Protestant theology from the first half of the twentieth century. For this act is on the one hand indeterminate, and on the other hand underlies the whole culture. The specific peculiarity of religion cannot be grasped on the basis of the religious act alone. For this reason, I transfer this act-moment (*Vollzugsmoment*) into the more complex triadic structure of religious communication. Thereby, the act-bound theories of religion of the 1920s are given a more precise hermeneutic version. Here, too, it is not a question of a break with the theological determinations of religion in Protestant theology, but of a better theological understanding of the Christian religion. However, the theological development of the second half of the twentieth century has not followed up on the construction of a theological presupposition of faith in order to justify it. This is so because these theologies, and the foundations of the Christian religion which have been worked out by them, only function in such a way that a factor of the Christian religion is postulated as their prerequisite. However, since faith is, as it were, secondary to an already given God, one cannot avoid understanding faith as a work or an

³¹ Cf. NONGBRI, B. **Before Religion**. A History of a Modern Concept. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2013.

interpretation of man. Therefore, I plead that the concept of revelation not be understood as a foundation and precondition of the Christian religion, but – as in the theology of the first half of the twentieth century – as a structural description of faith, or the Christian religion. Faith and God emerge together in the Christian religion.

Systematic theology is the science of the Christian religion, but how does the science of the Christian religion relate to the Christian religion? Systematic theology can only relate to the Christian religion in such a way that it constructs Christian religion in itself on the level of science. Does this not separate theology from religion, however, as Abreu criticizes?³² Such a view presupposes understanding scientific theology as a kind of outflow or extension of religion into it. This, however, is a fatal fallacy that undercuts the constructive achievements of the theologian. It is always theology that makes determined assumptions in order to describe the Christian religion. Since the Enlightenment, as we have seen above, theology distinguishes itself from the Christian religion. This distinction is one that theology itself makes.³³ Thus, the differentiation is simply not present. By distinguishing itself as a science from the Christian religion, theology recognizes the latter's autonomy and releases it from theological paternalism. Religion is lived by individuals. They use the Christian religion in their own way to interpret their lives. Systematic theology must recognize that the individually lived Christian religion is autonomous, but theology is also an autonomous science. This means that both theology and religion are self-referential. This, of course, does not deny that there are complex overlaps between the two, that is, that theology uses concepts and images that the Christian religion also uses, and vice versa. However, such complex overlaps do not affect the fundamental autonomy of each.

³² Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach, p. 157: "However, I fear that this distinction between theology, as a reflexive science, and religion, as an autonomous form in modern self-differentiated culture, is too strong in your system. Could it really be possible to establish such a strong separation between theology and religion?"

³³ Cf. DANZ, C. Theologie und Religion. Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Unterscheidung. In: HEIL, U.; SCHELLENBERG, A. (Hg.). **Theologie als Streitkultur**. Wiener Jahrbuch für Theologie. Band 13. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlag; University of Vienna Press, 2021, p. 139-154.

Systematic theology and Christian religion must be distinguished. However, should not the two of them coincide at one point, perhaps in a religious experience? If this were the case, as Abreu assumes, then one would have to understand theology as a kind of faith or religion, which is only possible under this presupposition. As a consequence, it is clear that systematic theology would no longer be able to be conceived as a science in the university sense.³⁴ Apart from the fact that the concept of experience is too indeterminate to function as a foundation of religion and theology, a religious experience can only be individual. For this reason alone, religious experience is ruled out as the foundation of a scientific theology. There is no science of individual experiences. Systematic theology can only be science if it proceeds from presuppositions that are universally accessible. However, this does not apply to religious experience. Questions of presuppositions in theology cannot be clarified by simply declaring them as axioms or hypotheses.³⁵ It is true that every science works with presuppositions, but that does not mean that everything possible like UFO's or ghosts can be declared as axioms and hypotheses.

If the modern distinction between theology and religion is assumed and taken seriously, then systematic theology refers to the Christian religion against the background of the distinction between the two. Theology can be an autonomous science only if it is self-referential, which in turn means that it constructs its object, the Christian religion, with its own conceptual means. Otherwise it cannot refer to the Christian religion. This is true for all sciences concerned with religion. No science as science has an equally immediate or authentic access to its object or simply reproduces it. What distinguishes systematic theology from the other sciences of religion is that

³⁴ This becomes clear in the theology of experience of the nineteenth century, which made individual religious experience the basis of theology. Cf. HOFMANN, J. C. K. v. **Der Schriftbeweis**. Ein theologischer Versuch. Band 1. Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1852, 10: "Theology is a free science only when the very thing that makes the Christian a Christian, his independent relationship to God, makes the theologian a theologian in scientific self-knowledge and self-expression, when I, the Christian, am the theologian's own substance of my science." In terms of the history of theology, one must say that theology of experience is an attempt to replace the dissolution of the Protestant principle of Scripture with an individual religious experience.

³⁵ Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach, p. 162-163 (Question 3).

it includes the internal view of the Christian religion in its description. It constructs the believers' view of their faith. Only in this sense can systematic theology be a science of faith,³⁶ and only this can be meaningfully meant when an appeal is made to a religious experience. This includes the task of constructing the knowledge of the Christian religion to be religion, that is, its inner functioning as religion from the point of view of believers.

In this way, systematic theology establishes within itself a complete image of religion that remains distinct from the lived religion. Only by distinguishing its own image of the Christian religion from the latter, can it avoid putting itself in its place or taking its own construct for the true and proper Christian religion. Precisely by doing so, however, systematic theology loses its object (*Gegenstand*). Systematic theology does not have the truth of the Christian religion at its disposal; it rather clarifies its inner workings. However, this is exactly what a science must be able to do. And only by distinguishing its own image of the Christian religion from the Christian religion, can systematic theology be mediated with it. For only in this way can it take into account the autonomy of the Christian religion in it as a science. Both are autonomous. As an autonomous science, systematic theology constructs the autonomy of the Christian religion, namely, a complete, transparent image of itself as a religion.

3. Christian Religion as a Communication Event (*Kommunikationsgeschehen*)

Systematic theology constructs a complete image of the Christian religion from its self-view. It thus assumes the knowledge of the Christian religion of *being* religion and *intending* religion with its contentual statements. Such an understanding of the Christian religion, as explained above, undertakes and continues the history of development of modern Protestant theology. Thus, religion is understood as a self-referential event that knows itself as religion and is structured in itself, following the act-bound determinations of religion of the theology of the first half of the twentieth century. However, compared to these conceptions, the concept

³⁶ Cf. BARTH, K. **Die Kirchliche Dogmatik**. Band I.1: Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes. Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A. G.; Zollikon-Zürich, 1964, p. 16-23; BULTMANN, R. **Theologische Enzyklopädie**. Hg. v. Eberhard Jüngel und Klaus W. Müller. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1984, p. 166.

of act is further determined as a triadic communication event on the one hand, whereas the claim to construct a universal human self-consciousness or a universal subjectivity in theology is renounced, on the other. In contrast, the triadic communication event concerns the subject as it occurs in religion and does not refer to a general constitution of the human being.

The proposal that Christian religion emerges from itself in Christian-religious communication represents a continuation of the theological debates on the concept of religion stemming from the first half of the twentieth century. Religion cannot be sufficiently recognized on the level of its statements, since these can always be used and applied non-religiously. Thus, there is a need for a level “behind” the statements and the signs with and in which religion presents and articulates itself. For the nineteenth century, this was a religious principle anchored in the structure of man or his consciousness, a religious disposition, or a religious a priori. Religious communication emerges from cultural communication through its actualization, as it were. Such a transcendental or faculty-theoretical presuppositional construction, which hypostasizes the historical occurrence of religion as an anthropological feature, became implausible around 1900. But also theology in the first half of the twentieth century is of the opinion that religion cannot be recognized by a recourse to its propositions. However, the level “behind” the statements of religion is now no longer seen as a religious disposition given to humans – a concept of religion, as Tillich says³⁷ –, but in the act of religion. However, since – as mentioned above – this act underlies all cultural contents, such an act-bound concept of religion, is not sufficient to determine religion. The act-bound concept of religion must be further determined by the more complex model of content, appropriation, and representation. The Christian religion does not arise from appropriation alone, according to Abreu’s interpretation,³⁸ but from all three elements together. The Christian religion exists only when people appropriate the handed down Christian-religious tradition and use it for the representation of their religion. Apart from people intending the

³⁷ Cf. TILLICH, P. Die Überwindung des Religionsbegriffs in der Religionsphilosophie. (1922). In: CLAYTON, J. P. (Hg.). **Main Works – Hauptwerke**. Band 4: Religionsphilosophische Schriften. Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987, p. 73-90.

³⁸ Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach, p. 159-160 (Question 2).

Christian religion with their communication, i.e., apart from people using the communication religiously and knowing that what they intend is religion, there is no Christian religion.

Since the Christian religion is understood as Christian-religious communication that refers to itself, there is no need for any preconditions that are given outside of it. Neither an already given religious object nor an already given religious subject is claimed. Both are hypostatizations used to justify the Christian religion. These justifications remain circular, however, precisely because they posit an element of the triadic interrelationship from which religion arises as its presupposition, and in this way unilaterally dissolve the circle. This is likewise the case with attempts to ground the Christian religion in a religious experience. The circular structure of the Christian religion does not merely concern the circle as such, but whether one can use it as a justification. If one rejects this, as does Tillich in his *Systematic Theology*, then one cannot postulate a religious experience as the grounding of the Christian religion.³⁹ This alone is the point of my critique of religious experience, namely, the grounding of the Christian religion on the religious experience, and not the religious experience itself. I do not deny a religious experience or religious affects. However, they have their place *in* the Christian religion and do not function as instances of justification given before and outside of it.

But am I not secretly making the presupposition of a transcendental-philosophical concept of religion, if I allow religion to arise from the interrelation of content, appropriation, and representation, as Abreu conjectures?⁴⁰ Transcendental means: a necessary and universal regularity. If one understands religion in this sense as a component of the transcendental structure of consciousness, as in the nineteenth century theologies, then religion is universal and necessary. It must be realized, as it were, in every human being. If this is not the case, then there is a defect in such a human being. It is clear: if one argues with a transcendental concept of religion, one has the problem

³⁹ Abreu's criticism of my rejection of a religious experience as a justification [!] of the Christian religion is incomprehensible to me if he at the same time holds with Tillich that it is circular. Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach, p. 160-164 (Question 3).

⁴⁰ Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach, p. 159-160 (Question 2).

of explaining the non-occurrence of religion. Of course, one can postulate that all people are religious – whether they know it or not. The only question is, what is gained by such a postulate of universality for the understanding of religion? Theories of religious experience are, as it were, attempts to respond to this dilemma. Inherently, they are connected with a critique of transcendental concepts of religion, since they focus on the individual experience of religion, which is precisely underivable.⁴¹ A religious experience, however, as already mentioned, is neither universal nor can it function as a justification of a theology. Thus the only possibility that remains is to connect the religious experience with a transcendental concept of religion or a universal content, which is given in this experience, in order to establish universality. With this, one admits that religious experience is a theological presuppositional construction, which, however, is afflicted with the dilemma that transcendental functions necessarily realize themselves.

In order to avoid the dilemma of attributing an unconscious religion to every human being – including the atheist –, a transcendental concept of religion must be abandoned. Religion originates underivably in humans. In order to describe the genesis of the Christian religion in humans theologically, it is neither necessary to presuppose that the human being is already secretly religious in some way, nor that religion arises in humans by way of referencing religious objects. What is presupposed in order to make the genesis of the Christian religion understandable is the Christian religion itself. The Christian religion must already exist as a special form of communication in culture. Religion can only come into being if it already exists. It constitutes itself, as Rudolf Otto noted, from itself.⁴² In contrast to Otto's hypostatization of the history of religion in man's a priori religious disposition, however, the Christian religious tradition is to be assumed. This is a contingent result of the cultural evolutionary process, which emerged at some point and will perhaps disappear again at some point.⁴³

⁴¹ Cf. PFLEIDERER, G. **Theologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft**. Studien zum Religionsbegriff bei Georg Wobbermin, Rudolf Otto, Heinrich Scholz und Max Scheler. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992.

⁴² Cf. OTTO, R. **Das Heilige**. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen. Hg. v. Jörg Lauster und Peter Schüz. München: C. H. Beck, 2014, p. 160.

⁴³ In this sense, the emergence of the Christian religion presupposes Jewish religious history. Without an already given religious communication neither Jesus nor the early Christians could have communicated religiously. Cf. DANZ, C. **Jesus von Nazareth zwischen Judentum und Christentum**. Eine christologische und religionstheologische Skizze.

Part of the Christian religion must be its knowledge of being religion. Those who practice religion know that they practice religion and not something else. Only by taking into account the self-view of religion in the concept of religion can functionalist understandings of religion be avoided. With them, it is possible to hold on to the universality of religion, but only at the price of eliminating the participant view. Religion is then attributed to human beings, even if they themselves are of the opinion that in and with their communication they do not intend religion at all, but something completely different. Such universality postulates must be renounced in the theological construction of the concept of religion. They simply do not bring any analytical gain in knowledge.

Now, how does the Christian religion come into being in the individual human being? The Christian religion comes into being simply by the fact that individuals *appropriate* the Christian-religious communication, which already exists in the culture as a differentiated and recognizable form, *as religion* and use it for the self-representation of their religion. In order to answer the question of where the knowledge of religion comes from, it is not necessary to postulate a religious disposition in man. Religion is constituted in the triadic interrelation of religious communication and it consists exclusively in the religious use of this communication. Of course, the success of Christian-religious communication remains contingent and cannot be constructed. This is exactly what the Christian religion symbolizes with the idea of revelation, which at the same time represents in it the structure from which it itself arises: it is dependent on the understanding appropriation and articulation of Christian-religious communication. Religion constitutes itself neither from its dependence on already given religious communication, nor from the understanding appropriation, or the symbolic representation, but from all three elements together. But for this, the Christian religion must already exist and be recognizable as such. Understanding appropriation does not mean an actual or authentic understanding, but only the distinction between communication and its intended religious meaning (*gemeintem religiösen Sinn*). By dispensing with a proper self-understanding in the concept of religion, it can be included in its determination that, the understanding of what religion is, is itself

subject to change.

4. On the Critique of a General Concept of Religion

At the center of the criticism of my contribution *Theology, Religion, Culture. Reflections on Systematic Theology following Paul Tillich* is the abandonment of a universal concept of religion as well as the consequences connected with it. Paul Tillich, on the other hand, worked out a universal concept of religion that enabled him to understand criticism of culture and society as well as atheism⁴⁴ as religion. This is quite consistent with Tillich's concept of religion, for which atheism is, at most, a boundary concept (*Grenzbegriff*).⁴⁵ But such statements make the problem of a universal concept of religion abundantly clear. It cannot, as in the case of the atheist, recognize the latter's view of himself, but ascribes religion where it is not intended by the agents themselves. In my contribution, I listed in the second section the arguments which make a universal concept of religion implausible under the conditions of a modern culture. They do not need be repeated here. That there are problems associated with the abandonment of a universal concept of religion is made clear by the queries. "How does a linguistic-historical conception propose to avoid a self-sufficient traditional particularism" (Eduardo Gross)? What are the consequences of limiting the concept of religion to Christianity for interreligious dialogue and religious studies (Joe Marçal dos Santos)?

The abandonment of a universal concept of religion as well as the restriction of the concept of religion to the Christian religion as advanced by a systematic theology of Christian religious communication, undertakes the criticism of the concept of religion that has been put forward both by the theology of the first half of the twentieth century and by the sciences of religion of the second half of the century. A universal concept of religion is a construct of modern Christianity or new Protestantism (*Neuprotestantis-*

⁴⁴ Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach, p. 177-179 (Question 8).

⁴⁵ Cf. TILLICH, P. Paul Tillich an Emanuel Hirsch. 20.2.1918. In: ALBRECHT, R.; TAUTMANN, R. (Hg.). **Ergänzungs- und Nachlaßbände zu den Gesammelten Werken von Paul Tillich**. Band VI: Briefwechsel und Streitschriften. Theologische, philosophische und politische Stellungnahmen und Gespräche. Frankfurt am Main: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1983, p. 114-123, here p. 122.

mus). It incorporates presuppositions and differentiations that originate in the history of European Christianity which are not found in other cultures. Can one simply transfer a concept coined in the history of Christianity to other religious cultures? If the difference of inner religion and society that has been formed in Europe is transferred to other cultures, does such a procedure not amount to a colonialism by other means?⁴⁶ In the more recent debates on the sciences of religion, the consequence has been to renounce a concept of religion altogether.⁴⁷

However, if one wishes to hold on to a concept of religion, one will not be able to avoid accepting this criticism of it. Consequently, I hold on to the concept of religion in such a way that I limit it to Christianity. This is not to deny that there are other religions or even to claim that only Christianity is religion. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing in theology that, what religion is, is determined differently in other “religions” than in the Christian religion. However, precisely this does not come into view within the framework of a universal concept of religion. A universal concept of religion postulates – as Paul Tillich does – an invariant religious core, which is the same in all religions (including the atheist!). Their differences lie only in the symbolic signs, but these are inessential or insignificant. This is an inadequate access, not only theologically, but also in a religious-scientific perspective, since it cannot grasp the specificity of the respective religions. In short, the task of a systematic theology of Christian religious communication concerns a pluralization of the concept of religion, i.e., the different understandings of what religion is.

In the interest of the specificity of religions and their consideration in systematic theology, the theological concept of religion must be limited to Christianity. It serves the transparent conceptual comprehension and explication of the Christian religion. Religion as a kind of placeholder

⁴⁶ In this respect, Abreu’s criticism is contradictory, on the one hand holding on to a universal concept of religion and on the other hand problematizing the social and cultural differentiation, which is the precondition of such a concept of religion. Cf. ABREU, F. H. Religion as a Self-Referential System of Religious Communication: An Assessment with Questions for a Challenging New Theological System. Notes of a Preliminary and (Merely) Intuitive Approach, p. 167-171 (Question 5).

⁴⁷ Cf. NONGBRI, B. **Before Religion**. A History of a Modern Concept; RIESEBRODT, M. **Cultus und Heilsversprechen**. Eine Theorie der Religionen. München: C. H. Beck, 2007, p. 17-42.

which is initially undetermined must be distinguished from this concept of religion related to Christianity. The object of the interreligious dialogue as well as of the work of the sciences of religion is to determine this placeholder in more detail from the self-view of other religions. The task of a theology of religions that takes religious and cultural pluralism seriously would thus be to investigate how non-Christian religions, for example, Judaism or Islam, determine religion and what they understand by religion. Already Judaism and Christianity cannot be understood in such a way that they simply determine a universal religious or a universal transcendence differently in terms of content. They already present completely different understandings of what religion is.⁴⁸ While Christianity incorporates the individual appropriation of God with Christology into the very idea of God, in Judaism God remains strictly transcendent. Jesus, then, is not simply a new content that Christianity incorporates into a universal idea of God that it allegedly shares with Judaism. Instead, with Christology, Christianity determines the understanding of religion and God very differently from the Jewish religion. However, if we understand both religions as particularities of a universal religion common to them, precisely such nuanced understandings of what religion is are not grasped.

The restriction of the theological concept of religion to Christianity does not imply particularism. Rather, it is a matter of describing religious and cultural pluralism in an appropriate theoretical way. This is not possible, precisely however, through postulates of universality, as in the pluralistic theology of religion. The proposed model of a systematic theology of religious communication starts from the particularity and absolute-ness of religions in order to theoretically grasp this pluralism. However, particularity does not mean isolation. Religions are subject to permanent re-description and change. They exist merely as self-descriptions, constantly reinventing and recreating their own traditions in exchange with other religious traditions and culture. For a theoretical description, however, it is not sufficient, as has been explained, to orient oneself with the images with which, for example, the Christian religion presents itself in Europe and other parts of the world. In a systematic-theological survey of the Christian religion, it must be made clear how these images function in the Christian religion as religion.

⁴⁸ Cf. DANZ, C. **Jesus von Nazareth zwischen Judentum und Christentum**. Eine christologische und religionstheologische Skizze.

Anyone who takes up religious and cultural pluralism in the theological construction of the Christian religion must reflect on the perspectivity and location-dependency of the concept of religion. As explained in the first section, the proposed concept of a systematic theology of religious communication derives from the history of the development of Protestant theology in the German-speaking world. It presupposes the differentiations between religion and culture that have been considered fundamental to the concept of religion in this history of development. These very distinctions, however, which are constitutive of modern European discourse on religion, exist in other cultures only as European exports. In many parts of the world, they are rejected as relics of colonialism.⁴⁹ This also applies to the difference between religion and culture, which is significant and virtually inalienable for the European understanding of Christianity. If one takes this on board, one will not be able to avoid admitting that in global Christianity itself religion is already determined and understood very differently. In order to make this possible, the location-boundness of a systematic theology must be made transparent. Thus, as explained, the conception proposed here is bound to the development of Protestant theology in the German-speaking world and results from it. It cannot simply be postulated and claimed as a global model. And it is precisely through this self-limitation, however, that it is able to recognize other forms of systematic theology and to enter into a constructive conversation with them.

Of course, none of this aims to renounce a theoretical description of the Christian religion in theology and, in this way, to become resigned. Systematic theology is a scientific discipline that constructs a complete image of the Christian religion with its own conceptual means. Systematic theology, thereby remains a normative science, but the normative image of the Christian religion, which it constructs, lies in the idea of a self-transparent, as well as self-referential, religion and precisely not on a content level. Thus, the change of Christian religion in modern culture is assumed. With the proposed concept of a systematic theology of religious culture, the metamorphoses of the Christian religion can be both theoretically grasped and critically assessed.

⁴⁹ Cf. YOUNTAE, A. A Decolonial Theory of Religion: Race, Coloniality, and Secularity in the Americas. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 88, Issue 4, 2020, p. 947-980.