

## **Power, History, and Meaning – World Religions and Political Affairs**

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The invoked revival of religion into the area of globalized politics has caused much fear and unease, often accompanied by almost complete ignorance. It sounds almost macabre, but theology as well as religious studies had profit as academic disciplines from the negative impacts of 9/11, especially by higher reputation in public circles and higher rates of financial support. For example when we are looking on the situation in Afghanistan these days, it seems quite obvious that religious affections and convictions can play a bad role in recent military conflicts, though there are no empirical proofs to the fact they ever caused one primarily. Therefore it depends from the perspective whether one sees in religious traditions victims of political instrumentalization or contrarily instruments for struggles for power, recognition, and influence on the societal field.

[And a recent example for an instrumentalization, not only for European observers of the U.S., is the ongoing Republican pre-election-campaign. If one really takes seriously what Robert D. Putnam and others researched in their important book on *American Grace*, especially regarding the younger population born after 1980, one would not treat religious issues in the campaign so negligently and provokingly.<sup>1</sup>]

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace. How Religion Divides and Unites us*, Simon & Schuster: New York 2011 (revised version). Putnam and Campbell show how far and how fast during the last decades (primarily under the government of George W. Bush) the enstrangement of the younger from their religious backgrounds towards secular attitudes moved forward because of the felt bad influence religious topics seemingly have for discussions during elections campaigns and other political debates (on media).

In any case, theology, religious studies, and social science draw their consequences out of the new situation of the last decade by coming up with detailed empirical and historical studies concerning the interdependencies of religion and politics world-wide. Thereby, two main approaches of scientific discovery can be distinguished: the first ones take mostly place within social science, especially in regional studies. They discuss the empirical questions on the role and the influence religious actors have within political discourses and conflicts.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to these more or less (micro-)sociological approaches, the research on the field of history of ideas asked more conceptionally for affirmative interpretations of religious convictions, let's say, when it comes to questions of democratic values and citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Now, both approaches are needed, both do bring benefits as well as they carry on some methodological and conceptional problems. So far, I will not discuss either of them in my talk. Instead, my claim as a Systematic Theologian, who is interested in questions of Political theory and ethics, is to specify the interpenetrations of politics and religions from the backdrop of cultural theory. By focusing on the connections between the dimensions of power, history, and meaning, in the emergence and establishment of social order, I hope to develop some hermeneutical instruments for a comparative Political Ethics of World Religions. And for this task which is fairly ambitious for 20 minutes, I will refer to two main thinkers in Political Theory of 20th century, namely Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) and Eric Voegelin (1901-1985).

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<sup>2</sup> Most prominent: P. Norris/R. Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide*. Second Edition, Cambridge Univ. Press: Cambridge/New York et al. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: *God's Rule: The Politics of World Religions*, ed. by Jacob Neusner, Georgetown Univ. Press: Washington 2003.

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To start with the former: What is interesting in Castoriadis' Political Philosophy as it had is mainly conceptualized in his book „The Imaginary Institution of Society“ from 1975<sup>4</sup> and besides other aspects, is his emphasis on the importance of the dimension of meaning for any adequate understanding of societies in general and politics in special. Societies do not simply consist of functionally operating institutions and organisations on the one, and people who live in and by them, on the other side. Such an understanding would be totally misleading because it takes seriously neither the nature (essence) of the political as first recognized by the old Greeks, nor the symbolic form of representation political and social practices even today rely on. Without ignoring what he calls the „Real“ and the „Rational“ as basic elements of social reality, Castoriadis therefore insists on the relevance of the Political as it mainly appears in its character as “Imaginary” and as specific form of “symbolic action”. So far, the concept of „Imaginary“ plays a central, even perhaps the crucial role in his thinking.

Societies represent complex orders in which a world of all-embracing significance is constructed by including the apprehended and observed “Real”, the functionally recognized and understood “Rational”, and the Sphere of the various “Symbolically” coded. “The institution of society is the institution of social imaginary significations. In principle, this institution has to confer meaning on everything that might present itself, "in" society as well as "outside" it. Social imaginary signification brings into being things

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<sup>4</sup> MIT Press: Cambridge (Ma.) 1987. My own interpretation of Castoriadis owes much from the analysis of Hans Joas (cf. Institutionalization as a Creative Process. Sociological Importance of Cornelius Castoriadis' Political Philosophy, in: Pragmatism and Social Theory, Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago 1993, pp. 154ff.) and Jürgen Habermas (cf. his: Excursus on Cornelius Castoriadis: The Imaginary Institution, in: The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, MIT Press: Cambridge (Ma.) 1990, pp. 327ff.).

as *these here* things, posits them as being *what* they are – the *what* being posited by signification, which is indissociably principle of existence, principle of thought, principle of value, and principle of action.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, societies do not present static orders. Moreover, they participate in processes of permanent transformation of their institutional patterns which sometimes leads even to radical revolutions. As a consequence, following Castoriadis means to respect more carefully the fact that societies reconstruct and recreate themselves permanently by creative re-interpretations their members do by means of a reservoir of infinite surplus of meaning, called magma. The magma thus forms the sphere of the Imaginary that will not be absorbed by the spheres of the Real, the Rational or even the Symbolic, but what could only be achieved and expressed through the gestalts of real, rational and symbolic. The concept of „Imaginary“ in Castoriadis refers to the fact that societies have always been shaped by specific significances and values (value judgements) which for themselves don't derive from rational or conscious action (“Setzung”) but from self-creation. The „imaginary has to use the symbolic not only to ‘express’ itself (this is self-evident) but to ‘exist’, to pass from the virtual to anything more than this.”<sup>6</sup> (128) This self-creation is likely being a *creatio ex nihilo*, a real creative act of human thinking and conduct. Therefore, the Imaginary does not function as denotational category, but as connotational one. Only by this it shapes the dimensions of social reality and their institutional expressions. “*To tie together*: "world-image" and society's own "society's image" – therefore, also, the image of its "place in the world" – have always been two sides of the same coin. They have belonged to the same magma of social imaginary significations in and through which society makes itself be in making

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<sup>5</sup> C. Castoriadis, Institution of Society and Religion, in: *World in Fragments. Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination*, Stanford Univ. Press: Stanford (Ca.) 1997, p. 313.

<sup>6</sup> Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution* (fn. 4), p.128.

this magma be. "Image" here obviously does not mean copy or reflection, but work [oeuvre] and operation of the radical imaginary, organizing and constituting imaginary schema."<sup>7</sup>

Now, what is then special for traditional societies in history is the fact that their last and radical forms of the Imaginary which underlie the whole world of significance and the gestalts of their representation within a social order, often were symbolized by the "God"- referents: "What is the origin, the cause, the foundation of the institution (that is to say, of society)? What is its *wherfore*, its *raison d'être*? To this question, religion has, since all time, provided a response in affirming that the institution of society proceeds from the same "origin" as everything else, that is possesses, therefore, the same solidity and the same foundation as the entire world and the things contained therein, and a finality that is articulated in conjunction with their own finality."<sup>8</sup> – "Cornerstone of the institution of society, vehicle for the ultimate significations and guarantor of all the others, religion must sanctify, in one manner or another, both its own origin and the origin of the institution of society whose core it forms."<sup>9</sup>

Though Castoriadis as a thinker who was deeply influenced by Marxism does not really believe that religious social imaginaries (with the „God“-referent) can function as possible options any longer, he remains critical towards secular alternatives as well, especially towards Marxist substitutes. Therefore, Castoriadis has no doubt even modern societies cannot overcome their need of a „radical Imaginary“: "Every society up to now has attempted to give an answer to a few fundamental questions: Who are we as a

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<sup>7</sup> Castoriadis, *Institution of Society and Religion* (fn. 5), p. 319.

<sup>8</sup> Castoriadis, *Institution of Society and Religion* (fn. 5), p. 326. For similar formulations about the function of the symbol "God" see: *Imaginary Constitution* (fn. 4), pp.129.140ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

collectivity? What are we for one another? Where and in what are we? What do we want; what do we desire; what are we lacking? Society must define its 'identity', its articulation, the world, its relation to the world and to the objects it contains, its needs and its desires. Without the 'answer' to these 'questions', without these 'definitions', there can be no human world, no society, no culture – for everything would be an undifferentiated chaos. The role of imaginary significations is to provide an answer to these questions<sup>10</sup>.

Modern societies then only differ from earlier societies in their more or less "secular nature", i.e. their social imaginaries take shape as immanent forms of utopias or ideologies. Thus, Castoriadis' critique does not refer to traditional or modern patterns of the Imaginary in general. Moreover, the main problem results out of functioning of the Imaginary itself. In any case of its symbolic articulation, the Imaginary tends to let people (as individual agents) forget that it was them who have created a society and who are still able to reinterpret, to criticize and to transform it. The aura, the nimbus of sanctity which is common for every cultural taboo (which is probably one form of social imaginary), creates an atmosphere of radical authority that embarrasses individual subjects in their creative actions. And thus, one could also say, when it comes to the "quasi-divine given" magma, there is only a small thin line between God and idols, between product and fetish. Religious forms of magma endanger the autonomy of society (as human self-creation) in a radical manner.<sup>11</sup> For Castoriadis, the history of religions is full of exactly this behaviour: people were treated and kept in inactivity or lethargy through legitimating

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<sup>10</sup> Castoriadis, *Imaginary Constitution* (fn. 4), p.146f.

<sup>11</sup> This is why Castoriadis concludes his essay with the final statement: „*the enigma of heteronomous society and the enigma of religion are, in a very large part, one and the same enigma.*“ (329; cursive by the author)

social order by a divine power whom to resist already meant idolatry and brought the delinquent therefore mostly to social and more often also to physical death. So, the history of political order, the process of ongoing transforming institutionalizing can be described as well as a process of sacralization with permanent “rearrangements”

(“Umbesetzungen”) by symbols of the magma, to quote once Hans Blumenberg<sup>12</sup>.

In spite of the fact Castoriadis was clearly right in his critique of deformational power religious traditions sometimes had and why therefore a call for pushing them back to save human autonomy (as their creativity) was needed. But he did not spend enough work on any historical proof on this fact. Instead, he more or less ignored the wide range of differences and dynamics within the history of religions through the centuries. Thus, he consequently failed in observing a plurality of patterns in which the relation between God and World between the transcendent and the mundane aspects of reality, in which spiritual and political power, can be described. Insofar, for any better understanding of what I would call the dynamics of the religio-political within human history, a more comparative approach seems to be more appropriate. And that brings me to the Axial-Age-theories, and especially in the version of Eric Voegelin.

## 2.

Eric Voegelin has immesively researched in the issue of „Order and History“, as his unfinished opus magnum is titled. In the volumes of this magisterial work he asked for the various symbolic systems that have given meaning to social and political order in human history: „The self-illumination of society through symbols is an integral part of social reality, and one my even say its essential part, for through such symbolizations the

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, MIT Press: Cambridge (Ma.) 1985.

members of a society experience it as more than an accident or a convenience; they experience it as of their human essence. And, inversely, the symbols express that man is fully man by virtue of his participation in a whole which transcends his particular existence<sup>13</sup>. Thereby, his interest is guided by his conviction that only through deep analyses of the cultural respectively symbolic vocabularies of historical societies a sufficient answer could be given to the question for what the political is all about. When Voegelin speaks of the “drama of human existence” then he pursues a twofold goal: first he wants to emphasize like Castoriadis does that man is both, a philosophical as well as as political human being (animal) which is challenged to act together with others in different orders and to ask thereby for his personal and social identity in the participation of all beings, to use Voegelin’s own terminology. His second claim is to reject from the very beginning any kind of teleological understanding of history. Otherwise one could not speak of both, the „drama of history“, and the dignity of human’s capacity to create his own institutionally formed life-worlds. Therefore, human history must be recognized as an openly, but ambivalent process of “self-clarification of human mankind” (Cassirer). Now, as far as different civilizations in history have expressed their world-experiences through different symbolic sets (via an quadrupel of categories, namely human being, society, world, and divine reality [God])<sup>14</sup>, their view on the very nature of what we call

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<sup>13</sup> Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, Univ. of Chicago Press (1952): Chicago 1987, p.27. For the consequences of Voegelin’s Political theory for a recent philosophy of religion, see the German dissertation by Marc Möres (*Im Zirkel von Grund, Bewusstsein und Gesellschaft. Eine Studie zum Verhältnis von Religion und Politik in der politischen Theorie Eric Voegelins*, Friedrich Pustet: Regensburg 2007.)

<sup>14</sup> See the opening sentences of Vol. 1: “God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being. The community with its quaternarian structure is, and is not, a datum of human experience. It is a datum of experience insofar as it is known to man by virtue of his participation in the mystery of its being. It is not a datum of experience insofar as it is not given in the manner of an object of external world but is knowably only from the perspective of participation in it.” (Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 1: *Israel and Revelation* (=Collected Works Vol. 14), University of Missouri Press: Columbia/London 2001, p. 39).



the political as the basic form of human self-interpretation through discovering an order in reality differed. Like Castoriadis, Voegelin shares the importance of the human capacity to imagine constructing a symbolic world-view that helps people to get orientation in their life and for their existence. But for Voegelin already this imaginary competence of man does not result out of a pure/mere projection (or even illusion). Moreover the partial benefits (and there can be no absolute ones as long as history exists) of human imaginary are grounded in reality because it is reality in itself that is – to some extent – symbolic, or more precisely shows an imaginary dimension. “Imagination, as a structure in the process of a reality that moves toward its truth, belongs both to human consciousness in its bodily location and to the reality that comprehends bodily located man as a partner in the community of being. There is no truth symbolized without man’s imaginative power to find the symbols that will express his response to the appeal of reality”<sup>15</sup>

Again, the similarities between Voegelin and Castoriadis should not disguise us that their conceptions are based on completely different methodologies and theoretical impacts. Though both thinkers understand human history as the crucial medium in which human beings and societies ask for (ultimate) meaning and represent them by institutional practices and social (and political) orders, only Voegelin was obviously interested in the historical analysis of several qualitative differences between various symbolism of political power and cosmo-social order through human history. These qualitative gaps, so to say, have changed the view on politics and their moral dimension profoundly. Thereby,

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<sup>15</sup> Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol. 5: *In Search of Order* (=Collected Works Vol. 18), Columbia/London 2000, p. 52. Therefore, the human capacity for imagination can be as well perverted or verified. A similar formulation of this general perspective on man, reality and symbolic (imaginary) representation can be found in the essay “Experience and Symbolization in History” (1970): “Man knows the symbols engendered to be part of the reality they symbolize – the symbols “consciousness,” “experience,” and “symbolization” denote the area where the process of reality becomes luminous to itself.” (In: *Collected Works Vol. 12: Published Essays 1966-1985*, Columbia/London 1990, p. 120).

Axial Age is simply the name for the period in human history that obviously has influenced the following centuries most extensively by challenging the old symbiotic order of divine (transcendent) and mundane (immanent) reality, especially when it comes to questions of political power and leadership.

However skeptically Voegelin remained towards the Axial-Age-Theory in general and towards Jasper's version in special, he nevertheless accepted that during this time between 800 and 200 BCE in Old Israel and Greece, in China and India (and perhaps as well in Persia) a radical and important breakthrough has happened by the emergence of new forms of symbolism using first time in human history universal categories (like humanity, humankind etc.) and by imagining new models of a universal, moral order inspired by transcendental or transcendent visions/images/imaginings of the „Good“, that almost always were visualized by “God” or “gods“. Voegelin speaks of „multiple and parallel leaps in being“<sup>16</sup> (“*Seinssprung*”). The meaning of human existence, the meaning of political power and of human action, was from then on conceptualized through religious symbolisms that focus on real tensions that lie in the heart of the relation between God and King, God and man, the divine and the mundane reality.<sup>17</sup> By interpreting social order radically through the perspective of a divine and universal (all-encompassing) counter-reality the former sanctified traditional order got into question and was often transformed. Therein, one very basic reason can be recognized why all so-called world-religions tend to act offensively in political affairs, as the subtitle of my talk

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<sup>16</sup> See the Introduction to Vol. 2 of Eric Voegelin, *Order and History: The World of Polis*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press 1957, p.19-23, where he emphasizes three aspects of this “leaps”: first they bring men a new truth about order but without reaching the whole truth; moreover there is a permanent need for reiteration through time; secondly, the leaps that break with the cosmological and less complex myth in Hellas and Israel have parallels in China and India; and thirdly, the different types of leaps differ widely in their symbolism as well as in their radicality.

<sup>17</sup> See also: Ch. Taylor, *What was the Axial Revolution?*, in: *Dilemmas and Connections. Selected Essays*, Harvard Univ. Press: Cambridge (Ma.)/London 2011, p. 367-379.

suggest, and why it is a certain kind of naivety to think the day will come when they will completely withdrawing from politics at all.

Therefore, what Castoriadis called the danger of an ideologically inspired „radical self-exclusion“ which for him lies in the sight line of every concept of „radical Imaginary“ (be it religious or secular), can for Voegelin (and other Axial-Age theorists) only arise when the crucial Axial-tension between universal (divine) order on the one and particular (mundane) order on the other side was eliminated before. In these cases, we could speak – again with Voegelin – of „Political Religions“, where the holism of the universal religious symbolism has turned into political totalitarianism of particular social orders (of race, of nation, of class etc.). Unfortunately I cannot go into further details at this stage of my argumentation.

To give a first conclusion: The conflictual dynamics between religious traditions and political powers which shaped human history from its very beginning, can never be stopped or abolished. Both dimensions represent important elements of human condition that help us to keep alive, to stabilize and to guarantee the process of recreation via reinterpretation in the endless search for an all-embracing meaning and significance of and for human existence and life in social order. What is then remaining is again a two-fold: the need for comparative cultural theories and ethical approaches to the meaning of human power and its responsible moral handling/management.

### 3.

This leads me to the last part of my considerations. Of course, what I have presented so far, are only Prolegomena to what I call a comparative Political Ethics of World

Religions. The limitations of my argumentation are quite obvious: I only have treated to political theorist, Voegelin and Castoriadis, who are not very prominent in the current debate on the problem of the „Theological-Political“, to mention at least one other thinker would be necessary to discuss, namely Leo Strauss<sup>18</sup>. Of course, there are some good reasons for my selective approach, not only because of our strict time schedule. One of them results from the fact that contemporary Political Philosophy often take for granted the only way out of political problems with religions would be to stress on the “true” secular nature of politics. In consequence, one often easily underestimates or even completely ignores the symbolic and imaginary dimensions of politics. This is why I have concentrated my argumenation so much on the concepts of Voegelin and Castoriadis. Compared with this my own imbalance much more lies in exluding the question of discursive power of politics that shapes both: language and action, *legein* and *teukein*. Thus, a critical genealogy of symbolic pattern of religious and political vocabularies could help to disclose/uncover/reveal the hidden and implicit mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within the institutions of social imaginaries and world-views through which every society is constituted in their everyday ritual practices as well as in their organisations and institutions of economy, bureaucracy, arts etc. Especially for Axial-traditions with their emphasis on moral universalism this point – the question of inclusion and exclusion – calls for higher attention and care. For any further work on this topic in my view central insights were already given by the writings of Michel Foucault.<sup>19</sup> (By

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. H. Meier, Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, Cambridge Univ. Press: New York 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language, Random House: New York, 1972, as well as: Power. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault Vol. 3, New Press: New York 2001.

that the late Foucault has focused his considerations very much on a concept of self-empowerment through an ethos of critique.)

But because the 20 minutes are already over, I now really have to concentrate myself in the very last sentences of this talk on the ethical framework that builds the backdrop of my considerations. As a result of my argumentation on the symbolic dimension of the political we have to re-interpretate the interpenetrations between the two dimensions of power and meaning. In his famous essay on „Love, Power, and Justice“ Paul Tillich had already reminded us of the defamation of (human) power and leadership so typical for Protestant intellectual thinking but which neither does justice to the creative dimension of human action nor does it take seriously the claims of religious ethics. Even problems of, p. e. how to implement human rights world widely or how to reach common equality rules in international economic systems require for a critical outlook regarding the question who is the ethically and juridically legitimated subject of these political actions. By no way, questions of power could be suspended. We “must remember that power is never only physical force, but is also the power of symbols and ideas in which the life of a social group expresses itself.”<sup>20</sup> Human Power as a specific act of self-transformation therefore belongs to human condition with its various forms of creative action. Without power we could not even give meaning to social reality, not to mention to rebuild and reform it. However, if this is true, then we cannot clearly distinct once and for all questions of ultimate meaning from questions of particular meaning in politics and other societal dimensions. So, it seems to be much easier to state the doctrine of two kingdoms

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, Love, Power, and Justice. Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications (1954), in: Main Works Vol. 3: Writings in Social Philosophy and Ethics, Berlin/New York 1988, p.629.

(or of the two swords) than to act according to it because in reality, and this does not only apply to Islamic countries, the transitions are fluently.

With it another point is interrelating. The world of politics and the world of religion are both worlds of search for personal and social identity-formation. Above all the Axial-religions and Axial-world-views represent social imaginaries that target both, an individual good life in a common good society. Thereby, the different religious symbolisms entangle with other symbolisms, especially the political one's. Thus, it is a task for any Political Ethics of World Religions sensitive to different cultural contexts to focus on the various interdependencies between ways and practices of political and social identity-formation and the influence religious symbolism play within these processes. In order to do this we should pay again more attention on pathologies the different patterns of the religio-political have formed through history. Otherwise we would simply ignore the almost to everybody obvious experience that religions are "leading sometimes to great moral advances and sometime to deep moral failures."<sup>21</sup>

This does not mean to neglect the furthermore important questions, p.e. how far creative reinterpretation of religious symbolisms can help to encourage a democratic ethos out of their own traditions. There is a need for hermeneutics in theological ethics by doing this work of a comparative approach to religious semantics. But as long as concepts of Political Ethics, even in theology, still promote the illusion that we can sharply separate the questions of the "ultimate" from the of the "penultimate" (to use a distinction from Bonhoeffer), and as long as they suggest there might be the perspective of a global consense of a common understanding of the religious/secular or holy/profy-dichotomy

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<sup>21</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution. From the Paleolithic to Axial Age*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge (Ma.) 2011, xxiv.

which is so central for the sphere of religion, our discussion may be endless but more or less fruitless when it comes to their output/results.

On contrary my argument for a Political Ethics of World Religions that is sensitive to both, cultural contexts and human history, refers to a hermeneutic of the foreign and follows an option of – what Michael Walzer once called – an „iterative universalism.“<sup>22</sup>

For Christianity, to come at least in the very end to my own profession as a Systematic Theologian, one crucial task would be to ask what is really meant in the Apostle's Creed when „power“ is only twice predicated of God, namely of God as the Creator and of God as the last Judge, both in combination with the symbol of the Father. And what consequences lie in that concept of divine power when it comes to human empowerment in being responsible towards Creation; and finally, why is it then that in the most serious situations of life the ideal of Christian existences calls for an attitude of radical detachment and self-sacrifice (cf. Phil 2: 5-11). The challenges for Christian Ethics that is neither naive nor simplistic, but keeps its eyes open to real politics – in my view – are enormous and – sorry for that – not even approximatively considered yet.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Michael Walzer, Two kinds of Universalism, in: The Tanner Lectures Vol. 11 (1990), pp. 509-556.