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Negative Theology and Theological Hermeneutics: The Particularity of Naming God

by

Lieven Boeve

Introduction

In this contribution, I will undertake an analysis, both from a cultural theological and a fundamental theological perspective, of the revival of religion in current Western society and philosophy. In so doing, I will try to uncover how a kind of cultural and philosophical apophaticism is at work in this religious revival. I will indeed point to a negative theological trend, which poses serious challenges for a repositioning of Christian faith on today's religious scene, and provide a reflection thereon. The theological question is basically the following: does the cultural transformation of religion in Europe, to which the religious revival points, and its reflection in contemporary philosophy, also induce a transformation of Christian faith? In other words, is negative theology the future of all Christian theology?

In the following, I will first develop how the transformation of religion in Europe can be analysed in terms of a kind of culturally motivated apophaticism, expressing an embarrassment with religious traditions that are too particular and determined, especially as regards to Christianity. Secondly, I will focus on the reintroduction of religion in contemporary, so-called continental philosophy. In this movement, there is a strong apophatic drive that can be distinguished, which reduces religion and the truth claims ventured in it to departicularised basic structures of religious desire. Finally, I will deal with the challenge these cultural and philosophical developments put forward for contemporary Christian theology. Is negative theology indeed the future of religion, of Christianity, in Europe?

1. Cultural Apophaticism

First, I would like to point out a tendency in our contemporary context that seems to be of major importance for the way in which people today, including many Christians, perceive religion and religiosity. This tendency,

which I have coined ›cultural apophaticism‹, would seem to be a product of the processes of detraditionalisation and pluralisation, which have changed the religious landscape of Europe over the last half century. Both processes seem to foster the development of a broadly-spread, vague religiosity that does away with some particular beliefs of Christian faith and is open to alternative expressions.[1]

1.1 Detraditionalisation and the longing for ›something more‹

The processes of detraditionalisation have not led to the disappearance of religion in Europe, but to its transformation.[2] The continuing institutional and mental dechristianisation of Europe have not led to a secular culture and society, but to a new kind of vague religiosity. Some have termed this phenomenon ›something-ism‹, referring to its rather indeterminable acceptance that ›there is something more‹ to life than facts and figures. Some claim that this religiosity is not an infantile waste product of contemporary secular culture, but a new shape of humanity's religious consciousness, resulting from the disenchantment with secular rationality and utopia, and reacting against the nihilism in post-secular society.[3] Confronted with the contingency and meaninglessness of their existence, people develop a new type of religiosity with special attention to personal experiences and responsibility, while being averse to traditional orthodox religions. It is the expression of a religious longing, adequate to the contemporary context, for the hope that there is more to life than what scientific worldviews maintain. To be understood most likely as the backside of this something-ism is the vivid and profuse ›off-piste‹ religious imagination, which gives rise to new religious movements borrowing from Eastern religions, the renaissance of ancient Celtic religion, all kinds of syncretisms, etc. To be sure, this evacuation or ›deconstruction‹ of specific Christian beliefs, rituals and practices is not only visible with those who have taken

[1] For these paragraphs, I also refer to a longer treatment of this phenomenon in: L. Boeve, God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval, New York/London 2007, 139-159.

[2] Cf. e.g. Y. Lambert, A Turning Point in Religious Evolution in Europe, in: Journal of Contemporary Religion 19 (2004), 29-45, and further: H. Cox, The Myth of the Twentieth Century. The Rise and Fall of ›Secularisation‹, in: G. Baum (ed.), The Twentieth Century. A Theological Overview, New York 1999, 135-143; P. Berger, The Desecularisation of the World: A Global Overview, in: Idem. (ed.), The Desecularisation of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics, Grand Rapids 1999, 1-18. See also my: Religion after Detraditionalisation: Christian Faith in Post-Secular Europe, in: Irish Theological Quarterly 70 (2005), 99-122.

[3] Cf. S.W. Couwenberg, Onttovering van het geloof en het ›ietsisme‹ als eigentijdse uiting van religieus verlangen, Streven, jan. 2004, 10-20; G. Groot, Geloven en geluk: over het krediet van een religieuze cultuur (Alfrinklezing 2004), Vught 2004, 5-22.

leave of Christianity, but also manifests itself within and at the borders of the Christian churches.

As a matter of fact, what is apparent in these strains of religiosity is a kind of culturally motivated negative theology. It strives at relativising elements of the Christian tradition, especially those aspects it denounces as over-determining, dominating and even oppressing the religious openness of human beings. The result is a spirituality with ample attention for diversity, freedom, power, energy, positivism, and so on. Religiosity then becomes a source of joy and happiness, and at the same time provides strength to cope with life's dark sides.[4] This apophatic move, one could say, prompts a scrapping of encumbering old religious images and ideas in order to start fresh, making room for new and more fitting religious images and ideas, giving shape to a religious longing for harmony, cohesion, etc.

This vague religiosity can be analysed as both the symptom of and the solution to the crisis of the modern subject, who has become conscious of the fact that he/she is no longer the master of him/herself. In a search for identity, meaning, harmony, stability, security, the human subject engages in a movement of self-transcendence towards something other, the divine, which both reveals the limits of the subject as well as enables it to cope with these limits. The growing number of those who believe in life after death reinforces this line of thought.[5] Because of the fact that meaning is located in the auto-construction of the self, people cannot situate their own death. Religion, as ›self-divinisation of decentredness‹, again seems to be first and foremost a mastery of contingency, the opening of a comforting and hospitable horizon in which everything finds its legitimate place, and everything is related to everything else. This would explain why this cultural apophasis sometimes swings in the direction of an overabundant religious imagination fed by the diversity of the religious market, leading to beliefs in angels, miracles, paranormal powers, and other phenomena, all of which, in some Christian theological circles, have been abandoned and demythologised in modern times.

It is, I suppose, a legitimate question to ask why people in their search for religion are not returning to Christianity, especially when one acknowledges that many of them are still nominally Christian. There is of course, due to detraditionalisation, no longer an immediate cultural link between religiosity and Christianity: the factual overlap between the Christian horizon of meaning and contemporary culture has faded away. Moreover, Christianity still suffers on many occasions from its own cultural-hegemonic past, and in this regard is called to account for seemingly still unsettled

[4] See also the analyses made by A. van Harskamp in: Het nieuw-religieuze verlangen, Kampen 2000.

[5] Cf. Y. Lambert, ›Turning Point‹, s. note 2, 43.

bills. Some, for example, such as the Dutch empirical theologian J.A. van der Ven, will venture that the language of the Christian tradition, the structures of Christian churches, etc., are outdated and should be renewed.[6] One may wonder, however, whether this is really the whole answer to the question. Maybe there is something about Christian faith itself that hampers those who are religiously longing from smoothly taking up this faith themselves.

1.2 Pluralisation and the Relativising of Christian Particularity

As mentioned above, the pluralisation of religion, both from an intra- and interreligious perspective, is the other aspect under which the transformation of religion in Europe should be discussed. On closer inspection, it would seem that this consciousness of religious diversity also enforces a culturally motivated apophatic theology, adding to the one discussed previously. In the prevailing cultural consciousness, there seems to be a wide spread assumption that above, or underlying, the many forms of religiosity and spirituality, intra-religious as well as extra-religious, resides the same religious longing, the same relationship to the divine (or whatever name this transcendent reality is given), expressed in manifold ways, according to time, place and traditions. This assumption is present in Christian as well as non-Christian circles.

Taken on its own merits, this kind of apophasis relativises that which makes Christianity a particular, specific religion, and further, that which distinguishes it or even separates it from other religions. Insofar as the specifically and particularly Christian obstructs the underlying, original experience of harmony and unity and its interpretation, this particularity should be wiped out, put between brackets, or neutralised as only one way to refer to the divine. The shared feelings of religious authenticity, of longing for wholeness and harmony make people do away with what brings separation, conflict and difference: particular truth claims, specific practices and imagery, etc.

Likewise in theological circles, many metaphors hint at such a structure to think about religious plurality: religions are paths to the same mountain top (mystically veiled in clouds); they are the many sides and limbs of the same elephant, the different perspectives one can take in looking at the same dew drop glistening at the break of dawn, the many colours of the same rainbow, and so on. Pluralist thinkers such as John Hick and Paul Knitter would advocate such a position: religious plurality is the other side of religious unity, and is even functioning towards an encompassing

[6] Cf. J.A. VAN DER VEN, God Reinvented? A Theological Search in Texts and Tables, Leiden 1998 (Empirical Studies in Theology 1).

learning process which includes religious harmony and peace.[7] Therefore, incarnation is to be considered as a myth or a metaphor, a Christian way to express our being related to the ›Real‹, and definitely not a historical claim, or a claim to uniqueness and unrepeatability.[8]

In his contribution to the last LEST IV-conference in Leuven, Sebastian Painadath, an Indian Christian theologian working at the Center for Indian Spirituality (Kalady, India) adapted the classical scheme of Paul Tillich, distinguishing between ›religion‹ and ›culture‹, to analyse and resolve religious plurality: religions are the forms of spirituality and spirituality is the substance of religion. Spirituality is the uniting kernel of cultural-historical differentiated religions.[9] One may wonder, however, whether the Hindu metaphor being referred to here, that of the nut from which one has to strip layer after layer in order to arrive at a harmonious kernel, is appropriate to imagine what particular religions are like, and to qualify the apophatic-theological strategies it instigates. It might be more appropriate to use the metaphor of the onion in order to imagine the outcome of such an apophatic move. After all, when one strips layer after layer of an onion, it is not a kernel one obtains; one is merely left with the skins.

1.3 Theological Evaluation: the Embarrassment of the Christian God

These culturally motivated negative-theological tendencies teach us, first of all, something about the contemporary context in which Christians, including theologians, are situated and in relation to which they are challenged to reflect upon their faith. Moreover, these tendencies do not halt at the entrance of the churches, but question Christian faith from within.

In all of its diversity, this cultural negative theology takes leave of the Christian God. There appears to be an embarrassment of God as the Other who makes with us concrete history; and this under two aspects: (a) as regards God's otherness, and what is revealed in this otherness and (b) as regards the revelation of God in the particularity and contingency of history; thus, as regards the way in which God is revealed.

(a) First, those in search of religiosity often experience difficulties with the otherness of God, of a God who from God's difference with history comes towards history and engages it. They seem to be unable to conceive of (and accordingly believe in, or surrender to) a transcendence that is

[7] Cf. e.g. J. HICK, An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent, London 1989, among others 299-315, 380; P.F. KNITTER, One Earth Many Religions. Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility, Maryknoll 1995, 35-37.

[8] See e.g. J. HICK, The Metaphor of God Incarnate, London 1993.

[9] S. PAINADATH, Diversity of Religions, Unity in Spirituality, in: L. BOEVE et al. (eds.), Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology, Leuven 2005 (BETL 188), 141-153.

really distinguished from and anterior to the human subject. This inability only becomes stronger when conceiving of this transcendence it implies the belief in a personal God making an appeal on people, challenging, perturbing, judging, loving them, etc. The embarrassment thus concerns the structure of faith, and the inability to come to faith, as an answer to an anterior and provocative appeal.

(b) However, this embarrassment not only concerns God as Other vis-à-vis history, but also the way in which this God reveals Godself in the particularity of history. Christian knowledge about God is intrinsically linked with an interpretation of concrete events and stories, embedded in particular histories of interpretation, and lived by specific communities of interpretation. A number of contemporaries in search for spirituality appear to have many difficulties with the irreducible link between revelation and particular history, that is, with a faith tradition that makes concrete history and remains indissolubly bound to it. Christians indeed profess that God reveals Godself in a definitive and unique way, unrepeatably, in specific events on particular occasions. The culminating point here is the profession that the concrete human being Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ and that in this Jesus Christ, God has become known to us in an incomparable way. From the perspective of history, however, these events and occasions are as contingent and particular as any other historical matter.

I will now try to show how this kind of cultural apophaticism would seem to be reflected in contemporary, so-called continental philosophy. For, after decades in which mainstream philosophy showed a lack of interest in religion and was very critical of any ›turn to religion‹ – often denounced as a ›theological turn‹ – it appears that religion is back in philosophical circles in the work of prominent thinkers such as E. Levinas, J. Derrida, J.-L. Marion, G. Vattimo, S. Žižek, and others. Also here religion and negative theology appear to go hand in hand. Perhaps one could say that the strong apophatic tendencies apparent in both the religious revival in contemporary European society and the cultural apophasis constitute the socio-cultural basis for this renewed philosophical interest in religious apophatic thinking patterns.

2. Philosophical Apophaticism

Indeed, a wide range of philosophers, belonging to the phenomenological and/or hermeneutical tradition – denoted as ›continental philosophy‹ across the Atlantic – have placed the theme of religion on their philosophical agenda, and this often in relation to their attempt to overcome ›ontotheology‹, namely, the philosophical attempt to ground (and signify) the whole of being in an ultimate being, a first cause which is its own cause,

God.[10] It is noteworthy that in this turn to religion, these philosophers often introduce negative-theological thinking patterns, now and then with explicit reference to the Jewish-Christian apophatical traditions. I will very briefly point to three different approaches from Christian thinkers, which all in one way or another can be analysed from this angle.

2.1 Jean-Luc Marion: Phenomenology before Hermeneutics and the Pragmatics of Naming God

Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness,[11] for instance, takes as its point of departure the ›saturated phenomenon‹. Marion considers the ›saturated phenomenon‹ to be the prime instance, the paradigm, to speak of reality as a whole – reality then phenomenologically reduced to ›that which appears‹ as always and already given, as a gift. In phenomenological language, this implies that for the subject as regards to what appears, the intuition is always greater than the intention, and supersedes the intentional dynamic of the knowing subject towards the phenomenon. As a consequence, the subject falls short in his or her attempt to apprehend what is appearing in the phenomenon. The subject is bedazzled in and through the overwhelming intuition, and is therefore incapable of giving a clear

[10] »Broadly speaking, the ontotheological endeavour seeks an ultimate reason that can account for the totality of beings. Its point of departure - beings - forbids that ontotheology encounters anything other, at the end of the chain of beings, than a being. Ontotheology proclaims that a being is what it is only insofar as its contingent mode of being corresponds, and is thereby grounded by, the essence of this particular being. This essence of a being, however, stands itself in need of a foundation, since the essence of a being, in one way or another, is dependent upon the (material) existence of the being of which it is the essence (in the same way as one abstracts a unified essence from diverse empirical tables). For this, ontotheology has recourse to God as the one who supposedly un-founded or founded in and through Godself, grounds the essence of beings, by simply thinking them or by creating these (imperfect) beings of which God is said to have the perfect idea eternally. ›God‹ can thus only appear here in the light of a correspondence theory, as that being, be it the highest, who assures a perfect fit between the essence or the ›being‹ of a being and the empirical being itself. Ontotheology's obsession with objects decides in advance how God will enter philosophical discourse; historically, God is that infinite instance that grounds and accounts for the contingency of particular beings. This ›God‹, then, is often modelled after causal and mathematical theories - as much as each house requires an architect as its cause, the totality and diversity of beings requires a ›prima causa‹, a First Being. God is an instrument used, by philosophy, to ground finitude and to give reasons for it. God must be a foundation. God cannot be anything else than that instance that saves the finite system from its own contingency and incoherency. And yes, this is what we all call God or, rather, this is what we all called God.« J. Schrijvers, Ontotheological Turnings?, in: Modern Theology 22 (2006), 221-253, 222.

[11] Cf. J.-L. Marion, Etant donné: essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation, Paris 1997.

and precise signification to the phenomenon. Instead of the nominative case, in which the subject's mastery is acknowledged with regard to the interpretation and signification of the phenomenon, the subject is turned into the dative case. The subject is the one ›to whom it is given to …‹, and who, in this reception, also receives him- or herself. Therefore, the human response is always and already secondary, and consists in nothing more than this responding to the reception of oneself from givenness. This structure of appeal and response is, according to Marion, (a) given, and therefore prior to language and hermeneutics. So language serves as the recognition of the givenness of that which is given in the phenomenon: not what is being said is of real importance, but that something is said.

For Marion, this dynamics of appeal and response, and the relationship it constitutes, also structures the nature of divine revelation, and the role of religious language. Therefore, it is not as much a hermeneutical approach to religion and religious language that teaches us how to understand (Christian) religion and religious truth, but a radicalised phenomenological approach: i.e. a phenomenology which serves as a heuristic that is able to reduce particularity and language to its essential structure (›autant de reduction, autant de donation‹ – the more reduction the more givenness).[12] Only insofar as a particular religious discourse expresses this universal structure is it discovered to be meaningful. The concrete discourse of this particular tradition is merely pragmatic and performative. And in order to stress that this structure is not specific for religious language, Marion compares the function of religious language with the role of language in the discourse of lovers. When one, over and over again, asks to one's lover ›Do you love me?‹ and affirms to this other ›I love you!‹, is this language not also predicative? That is, it helps in a radically pragmatic way to sustain the relationship between one and the other:

»Nous nous mettons (pragmatiquement) l'un en face de l'autre, l'un sous l'effet (perlocutoire) de l'autre, dans la distance qui à la fois nous sépare et nous unit.«[13]

Indeed, Marion's argument with regard to negative (or better mystical)[14] theology displays a similar concern: Christian God-language is not grasped

[12] Cf. J.-L. Marion, ›Christian Philosophy‹: Hermeneutic or Heuristic?, in: F.J. Ambrosio (ed.), The Question of Christian Philosophy Today, New York 1999, 247-264.

[13] Cf. J.-L. Marion, Ce qui ne se dit pas. Remarques sur l'apophase dans le discours amoureux, in: M. Olivetti (ed.), Théologie négative, Rome 2002 (Biblioteca dell' ›Archivio di Filosofia‹ 59), 65-81, 79. Marion continues: »L'usage constatif et prédicatif (acte locutoire), voir actif (illocutoire) de la parole le cède définitivement à son usage pragmatique radical (perlocutoire): ni dire ni nier quelque chose de quelque chose, mais agir sur autrui et le laisser agir sur moi.«

[14] Ibid., 68.

between the ›saying‹ and ›unsaying‹ of what is proper to God but involves a third way, beyond *kataphasis* and *apophasis*,

»radicalement autre et hyperbolique. Car elle ne redouble pas la négation d'une affirmation supérieure, déguisée ou avouée, mais arrache le discours à la prédication. […] Il s'agit de passer d'un usage constatif (et prédicatif) du langage à son usage strictement pragmatique.«[15]

Every form of prayer and praise is reduced to a radically pragmatic and performative speaking of the God who is beyond being and discourse.

»It is no longer a matter of naming or attributing something to something, but of aiming in the direction of … , of relating to … , of comporting oneself towards … , of reckoning with … – in short of dealing with … .«[16]

Rather than ›saying‹, religious language has to do with ›hearing‹.

2.2 Radical Hermeneutics and the Apophaticism of ›Pure Religion‹

Deconstructionist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida critically respond to Marion that the reduction of reality to givenness cannot claim to be in a thinking that itself would be exempted from the structure of language. Marion does not and cannot reach ›beyond the text‹ and therefore would seem to fall prey to the onto-theological schemes he wants to overcome. In order words, Marion's attempt to overcome linguistic positioning is itself positioned. Derrida, on the other hand, tries to radicalise the hermeneutical turn of philosophy. For him, only a hermeneutics that deconstructs all signification to an originary differential space (différance), which is presupposed by and makes possible all discourse, is radical enough.[17] The later Derrida, herein emphatically accompanied by John Caputo and others, expresses the dynamics of deconstruction, and the corresponding critical consciousness, in explicitly religious vocabularies. This results in a so-called ›radical hermeneutics of religion‹ that seeks to determine the ›religious‹ in terms of ›religion without religion‹, which reduces religion to a universal structure of religious desire. As another way of expressing this structure of religious desire Derrida and Caputo indicate the ›messianic structure‹ recognised in, but at the same time distinguished from the various particular messianisms. As a matter of fact, this radical hermeneutics results – at least in Caputo's reception – in a kind of (philosophical) negative theology that expresses, beyond concrete discourse and particularity, a ›religiously being

[15] Ibid.

[16] Cf. J.-L. Marion, In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of ›Negative Theology‹, in: J.D. Caputo/M.J. Scanlon (eds.), God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, Bloomington 1999, 20-53, 30 (all ellipses in the original).

[17] Cf. J. Derrida, L'écriture et la différance, Paris 1967.

related to‹ that which lies at the origin of every particular religious discourse, but is betrayed in every attempt to name it.[18] Caputo indeed strives to uncover the structure of ›pure prayer‹, that is, a relation of the subject to a ›You‹ while at the same time deferring the question whether this ›You‹ in effect exists.[19] He is concerned, as it were, with retrieving a form of spirituality uncontaminated with particularity and narrativity to the point of dropping (reducing) the presupposition that there is a ›You‹ to whom or to which the prayer is directed. Pure religion makes praying *etsi Deus daretur*, not knowing whether there is a God ›at the other side‹ of the address. This results in a complete doing away with all positivity, Christian narrativity and even negative theology's ultimate ›limit-affirmation‹ that there is an Other, albeit ineffable and incomprehensible. At other occasions, I have called this movement a kind of ›committed agnosticism‹ [20]. It distinguishes itself from classical agnosticism, which in practice often seems to turn into a practical atheism, because it wants to retain the form of a God-oriented relationship without, nevertheless and paradoxically, adhering to the ›God‹ of this relationship. Committed agnosticism concerns itself with cultivating the religious attitude in all its purity, i.e. without the linguistic contamination of a particular narrative and of speculations concerning the beyond to which the narrative is committed to. The passion for unknowing amounts to a passionate refusal to choose between theism – an option for a relation with God – and atheism.

Despite this passion, however, Caputo is also aware of the fact that neither Derrida nor he himself escapes from linguistic contamination. In the end, he avows that the distinction between the ›messianic‹ and the diverse messianism

»cannot be rigorously maintained. […] We are always involved with structures whose historical pedigree we can trace if we read them carefully enough. […] That is no less true of deconstruction itself. […] If we search it carefully enough, we discover that it, too, is another concrete messianism, which is the only thing livable.«[21]

[18] Relevant literature: J. Derrida, Comment ne pas parler. Dénégations, in: J. Derrida, Psychè. Inventions de l'autre, Paris 1987, 535-595; idem.: Sauf le nom, Paris 1993; idem.: Foi et savoir. Les deux sources de la ›religion‹ aux limites de la simple raison, in: J. Derrida/ G. Vattimo (eds.), La religion. Séminaire de Capri sous la direction de Jacques Derrida et Gianni Vattimo, Paris 1996, 9-86; J.D Caputo, The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion, Bloomington 1997; idem.: More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are, Bloomington 2000; idem.: On Religion (Thinking in Action), London 2001.

[19] Cf. J.D. Caputo, Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Experience of Prayer, in: M. Olivetti (ed.), Théologie négative, Rome 2002 (Biblioteca dell' ›Archivio di Filosofia‹ 59), 861-880.

[20] Cf. L. Boeve, (Post)Modern Theology on Trial? Towards a Radical Theological Hermeneutics of Christian Particularity, in: Louvain Studies 28 (2003), 240-254.

[21] What Do I Love when I Love my God? An Interview with John D. Caputo (by B. Keith Putt), in: J.H. Olthuis (ed.), Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo, London/New York 2001, 150-179, 165.

As for his own position, Caputo would concede that he practices a Christian deconstruction; but one »which is very closely tied to Jesus the Jew, the Judaism of Jesus«[22] – before its integration in Christianity.

2.3 Hermeneutics of Religion According to Richard Kearney

Richard Kearney is an author who has difficulties deciding between a hermeneutical, phenomenological or deconstructionist approach, and who has criticised the tendencies to conquer ontotheology with philosophical negative theology. In agreement with Paul Ricœur, Kearney resists the ›short-cut‹ approaches of both phenomenology and deconstruction and their respective negative-theological outcome. This outcome reduces the narrative thickness of religious reality to the rather meagre result of an unknowable and untouchable transcendence (which according to him might be divine as well as monstrous)[23] to describe the depth-structure of religious realities. Kearney explicitly relates the constitution of signification to the long ›detour‹ of a hermeneutic of texts and, in so doing, points to the hermeneutical presuppositions of the short-cut approaches.[24] On the other hand, differing from Ricœur and relying on Caputo and Derrida, Kearney is more aware that his account is situated in a particular discourse and that his hermeneutic of religious texts, i.e. texts from the Jewish-Christian tradition, therefore, entails a certain ›wager‹.[25]

In *The God Who May Be*, Kearney indeed develops what he coins, a »phenomenological-hermeneutical retrieval« and points at the importance of the »metaphorizing role of hermeneutic mediation«[26] in understanding (Christian?) religion. To come to such an understanding, he engages a reading of key texts from the biblical tradition. His intentions are well illustrated when he, for example, offers an interpretation of the *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* of Ex 3, the story of the self-revelation of God in the burning bush. Against an ontological reading which conflates Yahweh with the supreme Being (*ipsum esse*) of the philosophers (leading to ontotheology), Kearney furthers – in line with a number of contemporary exegetes – an alternative

[22] Ibid.

[23] Cf. R. Kearney, Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness, London 2003.

[24] Cf. R. Kearney, On Stories, London 2002.

[25] I developed this at length in L. Boeve, God, Particularity and Hermeneutics. A Critical Theological Dialogue with Richard Kearney on Continental Philosophy's Turn (in)to Religion, in: Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 81 (2005), 305-333.

[26] Cf. R. Kearney, The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutic of Religion, Indiana 2001, 8.

eschatological reading: ›I will be who I will be‹. For God is not being nor non-being but a self-generating event.

»God is what he *will* be when he becomes his Kingdom and his Kingdom comes on earth. ›I am who may be‹: it is a performative rather than a constative expression, invoking »mutual answerability and co-creation«[27].

The God who may be is not the almighty, all-knowing, omnipresent God of onto-theology, but remains a God engaged in history, unconditionally loving and giving, calling us to a praxis of love and justice. The same eschatological-hermeneutical drive becomes manifest in Kearney's reading of the transfiguration narrative on Mount Thabor. The transfigured Christ interrupts the limits of intentional consciousness and reaches beyond perception, imagination and signification. Moreover, he is eschatologically profiled as the way, not the terminus; the narrative warns against a premature taking into possession. Therefore, we are left with the ethical choice between transfiguration and fixation: »either to transform our world according to the Christic icon of the end-to-come; or to fix Christ as a fetish whose only end is itself«.[28]

Precisely because of this eschatological transfiguration, any claim of christo-centric exclusivism, vis-à-vis other messianic and non-messianic religions, is illegitimate. Even more, perhaps inspired by the Derridean distinction between the messianic and messianisms, Kearney radicalises this eschatological reserve, and ultimately – although they are his primary sources – refuses to acknowledge any *de iure* epistemological priority of the biblical texts for his phenomenological-hermeneutical retrieval of religion. It is at this point that Kearney also tends to reduce religion ultimately to a quasi-universal ethico-religious structure, while placing at risk his own starting point: that only a hermeneutical detour through the narrative thickness of particular religious traditions leads to a better understanding of religion and its dealings with God.[29] This is well illustrated by his view on the plurality of religions, which resembles more or less what I described earlier as the cultural way of conceiving of it. In the end, for Kearney, all religious traditions, in one way or another, share the ›same‹ caring for justice and peace, for human wholeness and fulfilment, and they all convey narrative wisdom in order to realise this fulfilment. The God who may be is revealed in and witnessed to in many traditions, of which the insights may well be analogous or complimentary.[30] It follows from this that religious truth lies in what religions have in common – even under different hermeneutical perspectives – rather than in what differentiates them. This is the reason Kearney opposes the very explicit »confessionally partisan«[31] truth claims of religions; and, for Kearney, the uniqueness and definitiveness of the fullness of God's revelation in the Incarnation in Jesus Christ qualifies as such a claim.

Thus, in the end, language and narrativity differentiate and divide again. Religious truth is finally to be situated in what is radically beyond language, beyond narrativity, and hermeneutics becomes a tool to evoke and point at this beyond. Language again risks being considered as contaminating the quasi-universal purity of an ethico-eschatological religious desire. Ultimately then, Kearney also resists escaping the apophatical drive in contemporary philosophy.

2.4 Philosophical-Theological Evaluation: the Embarrassment of God's Incarnation in Christ

Let us come to a conclusion of this second part. It is not so much the fact that prominent philosophers still – or better: again – speak of God that matters to us here – although it surely is consonant with the revival of the religious in contemporary Western societies. It is rather the manner in which they speak of God that is of importance to the theological reflection we undertake here. Although all, of course in their own voice, display a hermeneutical sensibility for particularity, they all tend to place in practice the basic structure of the religious truth claim outside or beyond particularity, and deem language as contamination. In Marion's case, this is quite evident: it is not the ›what‹ of religious language, but the ›that‹ which is essential. And contrary to appearances, the same thing is very much present in the works of Derrida and Caputo: the religious truth claim appears to be entertained at the expense of, and certainly not thanks to, its rootedness in a particular discourse. It is above all the extent to which their accounts of religion remain dependent upon negative theology that is symptomatic. All of these philosophical theologies display a formal messianic structure that forever remains to be kept open. Moreover, because of its incurable predicative nature, language is considered as a contamination, even as a betrayal to a kind of original religious purity. In concrete prayers, the purity of the religious address at work in ›pure‹ prayer cannot be maintained. Because of the fall of, and in, language (language both as and in a fall), religious truth must be beyond language – even though both Caputo and Derrida would

[27] Ibid., 30.

[28] Ibid., 44.

[29] As already mentioned, I elaborated on this criticism in BOEVE, God, Particularity and Hermeneutics, s. note 25.

[30] Cf., e.g., KEARNY, The God who may be, s. note 26, 2, with hints in this direction as regards to Buddhism and Christianity (in reference to Bede Griffith); ibid., 6 (with reference to Charles Taylor); IDEM.: Strangers, Gods and Monsters, s. note 23, 45 (in reference to Thomas Merton); and, in relation to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, again ›Interreligious Discourse – War or Peace?‹, 7, and to all religions, ibid., 8.

[31] KEARNEY, Strangers, Gods and Monsters, s. note 23, 41.

be the first to avow that, on the epistemological level, there is no ›beyond language‹. At least Kearney would also stress the latter and propose a phenomenological-hermeneutical retrieval of religious texts to understand what religion is about, but in his case as well, hermeneutics ultimately leads away from particularity and the specific truth claims ventured in it.

However, is it legitimate to equivocate language with contamination? Since language seems to be our condition, does the irreducible particularity of religion contaminate the striving for religious purity? Is therefore religious truth as such impossible – or, to put it in the appropriate philosophical jargon: has religious truth essentially to do with clinging ›onto the impossibility of its possibility‹? At least these questions challenge, from a fundamental theological perspective, the importance of the incarnation as the theological-epistemological category par excellence to name God and to think about religious truth. Is Christianity, with its Christocentric and thus incarnational approach, not doomed to be always too particular, too historical, too positive? At least this is the challenge put forward by these apophatical trends to theology itself, as it were, for internal use, but perhaps such a reflection may also give some broader hints for a cultural and philosophical coping with the particularity of religious truth claims.

3. Rediscovering Christian Apophaticism at the Heart of a Radical Theological Hermeneutics

As I mentioned before, the theological question runs as follows: Is apophaticism the new religious way for Christians to deal with the contingencies and particularities of life? Even more: Is it the contemporary *modus* of appearance of Christian faith, even its fulfilment, or is it rather the expression of a post-Christian attitude of life? And as regards to the questions coming from philosophical apophaticism: can we still hold to the incarnation to conceive of the religious truth claim of Christianity? Or is the belief in the incarnation an a priori hindrance to religious truth and naming God, rather than the way to do so? In this last part, I address these theological questions from both perspectives.

3.1 Cultural Apophaticism and the Naming of the God of History

First of all, I would like to evaluate cultural apophaticism as the exponent of a post-Christian religiosity rather than the future of Christian faith itself.[32] The same verdict applies to philosophical apophaticism as well insofar as it reflects this cultural sensibility, which is the result of detraditionalisation and pluralisation.

[32] For these paragraphs, see also: Boeve, God Interrupts History, s. note 1.

Indeed, as already developed above, I fear that the two intrinsically interwoven constitutive elements of Christian faith are underrepresented or absent in it: first, the faith in God as the Other of history, qualified by the constitutive difference between God and humanity; and second, the inscription of the involvement of God with human beings and history in the very particularity of history. It is to these two elements that the living Christian tradition bears witness, in narratives and praxis, prayers and rituals, doctrines and reflections. Combined, they give rise to a specifically Christian critical-hermeneutical consciousness. Faith, then, is the option (made from a complex interplay of initiation, will and intellect) to look at history and society from the perspective of this God and to interpret them accordingly.

This precludes a very facile identification between cultural apophaticism and Christian apophatic theology. Indeed, some theologians do claim that precisely here, a close connection could be made again between culture and Christian tradition. Some would argue that through this vague religious apophatic sensibility a possibility arises to contextually anchor anew the relevance and plausibility of Christian faith, to correlate Christian tradition and the post-secular context, in order to reach a culturally accepted and theologically legitimate Christian faith. However, because of detraditionalisation and pluralisation, recontextualisation today should be wary of a too easy postulation of continuity, and should rather develop a sensibility for difference and discontinuity. The cultural apophaticism indeed challenges Christian theology, but not to recuperate it because of a familiarity with its own apophatic consciousness. On the contrary, cultural apophaticism rather leads Christian theology to rediscover anew the specificity of its own position, including its apophatic-theological dimension. In a Christian radical hermeneutical consciousness, *apophasis* is not doing away with *cataphasis*, but is intrinsically at work in it. I will here try to make this point somewhat clearer.

Christian hermeneutical consciousness is a resolutely theological consciousness, which aims at a continuous radical hermeneutics of history from faith in a God at work in it. This hermeneutic originated in the Old Testament, where for the Jewish people the exodus event became the theological key for reading God's activity in history. The continued theological interpretation of the exodus event functioned both in an aetiological (›because then, therefore now‹) and in a paradigmatic (›like then, so also now‹) perspective. In the theological hermeneutics of the present for the Jewish people, the exodus event formed the structuring pattern for new experiences of God's salutary involvement in history, experiences which si-

multaneously gave new shape to the exodus-God-experience.[33] The transmitted past informed their reading of the present; the lived and interpreted present re-actualised the salutary experiences of the past.

It is precisely in this kind of hermeneutic that the Jewish-Christian apophatic-theological consciousness is to be situated. Revelation of God in history and the prohibition to make images of God go hand-in-hand: the revelation of God to Moses at the burning bush: »I am there for you« (Ex 3,14), leads to the »You shall not make images« on Mount Sinai (Ex 20,4), for »I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery« (Ex 20,2). The negative-theological critical consciousness, then, does not distract from history, separating God from the historical and particular, but rather qualifies the way in which history is theologically interpreted. The God active in history cannot be comprised by history; every pointing to God's activity in history and every witness to it in narratives and praxis are therefore subject to an uninterrupted hermeneutics. In response to Richard Kearney: Biblical eschatology in no way implies an escape from particularity and history, but strictly binds God's revelation to it.

The same critical consciousness is at work in the New Testament. Here, from the very start, the Christological reading key underlying the theological hermeneutics of history is apophatic-theologically radicalised. Likewise here, this radical hermeneutic does not distract God and those believing in God from history, but rather to the contrary. The transfiguration story (Mk 9,2-10 par), e.g. in which Jesus is presented as the glorified Christ in dialogue with Elijah and Moses, is revealing. When Peter, full of awe, suggests to build three tents, he indeed does not know what to say (Mk 9,6). The evangelist, who resorts to using this narrative to express something about Jesus, then lets God typify Jesus, after which he suddenly concludes the event: when Peter and the other disciples looked around, they saw no one any longer except Jesus and themselves. They had to come down from the mountain again. Further, the fact that the risen Christ is not to be grasped in his earthly form, and yet is at the same time inseparable from it, is expressed in an exceptional way by the narrative of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24,13-32). The two travellers to Emmaus meet a stranger who, in the course of the encounter, reveals himself in word and deed[34] to be the Christ. Upon recognition, however, he immediately withdraws from them. Here too the Christian apophatic-theological reserve appears: only in the all too concrete, in the all too historical, in the all too

[33] For a clear presentation of this, see: D. Sattler/Th. Schneider, Art. Gotteslehre, in: Th. Schneider (ed.), Handbuch der Dogmatik, Düsseldorf 1992, 51-119, spec. 54-75.

[34] Words and deeds that in reference to the scriptures – beginning with Moses – through recontextualisation explain the complete Jesus-narrative.

contingent – and in an interpretation thereof – does God engage history in an irreducible and definitive way without ever coinciding with it.

God's ineffability has nothing to do with vagueness, nor with something that leads away from the concrete. To the contrary, it leads immediately back to history itself. God as the Other of history is involved in it as determinate Love, as a prophetic challenge to all to make visible God's invisible presence and activity. In this regard, it is like the love between two human beings which is not an indeterminate given, but which is only realised and survives as something very concrete, tangible, life giving, inscribed in particular events and stories, even when the language of love does not have the words for it, even when all determination ultimately falls short, and never succeeds in grasping its mystery.

3.2 Philosophical Apophaticism and the Truth of the Incarnation

In consonance with the cultural theological consideration which I just developed, I will now shortly go into a fundamental theological reflection on the challenge of cultural and philosophical apophaticism. In this respect, I would affirm that, as far as Christian theology is concerned, incarnation is not so much a hindrance, but the key to reconsider religious truth claims, in other words, to reconsider the naming of God. For it is precisely the theological-epistemological concept of incarnation that takes into account the very particularity, not as a contamination of, but as an irreducible condition for religious truth – there is no religious truth claim without particular discourse. At the same time, this incarnational interpretation of the irreducible particularity of religious discourse implies a critical and hermeneutical dynamic that already qualifies the religious truth claim.

This is at least what I would consider to be the epistemological kernel of the theological doctrine of incarnation. Contrary to some of the philosophical criticisms, the incarnation, as the anchor point of a constitutive Christology, is not the end, but the motor of radical hermeneutics. The all too particular is not an obstacle for the revelation of God, but its very condition. This is what a hermeneutical retrieval of the Christological dogma of Chalcedon points to: the affirmation that Jesus Christ is both God and human (unmixed, unchanged, undivided, unseparated) means proclaiming that in person, life, speech, and deeds, he was the definitive hermeneutics of God, but that he – himself being God – only can be approached in a radical-hermeneutical way. He is the definitive revelation of God, and this precisely in the paradoxical relation of God and humanity established in his person. Insofar as Jesus Christ is a signification of the divine reality, the same religious hermeneutical-critical proviso applies to him as to all other religious discourse. The *homoousious* of the Son indeed implies then that precisely in his person, life and words, Jesus Christ is considered by

believers to be the definitive signification (revelation) of God – »Whoever sees me, sees the Father« (cf. Jn 14,9). This implies at the same time that his person, life and words, being the signification of God, can only be known as the word about the Logos, while standing in a relationship to the Logos. In other words, God's superfluous love has been revealed in a particular life story that does not exhaust this love, but nevertheless signifies it in a definitive way. As a particular life story, Jesus' narrative bears, entangled in particularity, witness to the universality of grace, which as such can never be articulated.[35]

Indeed, incarnation presupposes an ongoing ›radical hermeneutics‹ that prevents one from lapsing into either a universalism without particularity or a closed particularism (fundamentalism). In this perspective, negative theology assumes a role very different from the one demonstrated in the aforementioned thinkers: its aim is no longer to take leave from the narrativity of religious discourse, but rather to raise one's awareness of this narrativity to the utmost. Apophatic theology does not abandon cataphatic theology, but qualifies it.

Put quite boldly: the truth of the incarnation is the incarnation of the truth. This indeed could be the contribution of a theological concept of religious truth to the contemporary philosophical debate on religion. Language does not need to be a contamination or a fall that would make any religious concept of truth in the end impossible and that would compel hermeneutics to leave its entanglement with particularity behind in the direction of a pure, but nonetheless untenable, religious truth claim. A hermeneutic of religion does not lead ›beyond‹, let alone ›behind‹, language, but to language itself: to the concrete stories, practices, texts and traditions in which religious truth is lived and experienced. Only in these can one find both the ground and the content of religious truth claims. It is only from the awareness of the entanglement of religious truth with this concrete particularity that religious believers can become more conscious of their being positioned in a context of religious plurality. As participants in the interreligious conversation, they venture, together with others, religious truth claims, each of which come from their own particular religious narratives and practices.

This may lead to a renewed, radical hermeneutics of religion that fully takes particularity as its point of departure, and that, in order not to fall prey to the pitfalls of a closed particularism or fundamentalism, develops a critical consciousness precisely *from within* particularity. It is because of the irreducible particularity of religious truth claims that an ongoing hermeneutical process is called for, a process that, in its determination of religious truth today, no longer abandons, but holds fast to precisely this very particularity.

[35] See L. Boeve, Christus Postmodernus: An Attempt at Apophatic Christology, in: T. Merrigan/J. Haers (eds.), The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology, Leuven 2000 (BETL 152), 577-593.