

The Epistemological Meaning of Religious Communities

Illustrated with Reference to the Amsterdam Lay Community 'Spe Gaudentes'

My PhD-research (supervised by professor Henk Witte) investigates the recent phenomenon in which theology has rediscovered the fundamental importance of the church and ecclesiology. This development seems to amount to nothing less than a paradigm shift, and it may therefore be called a 'turn to the church'. Now, as a member of the ecumenical lay community *Spe Gaudentes* in the city center of Amsterdam,¹ I have experienced that the results of my research have proven to be very helpful for a better understanding of my community life, and religiously ordered community life in general.

So, in what follows, I will offer a short introduction to my community. Afterwards, I will expose some elements of the turn to the church and show how its perspective seems to illuminate my community experience. Finally, I will draw some general conclusions about old and new forms of religious community life from this perspective.

I look forward to your contributions, questions and corrections in the plenary discussion.

Short introduction into the community *Spe Gaudentes*

To begin with, let me share with you about my experiences in community living. Around ten years ago, my wife and I got in touch with the community *Spe Gaudentes*, better known by the name of its main house, *Oudezijds 100*, in the Amsterdam red light district. This house has around seventy inhabitants, some of them because they are homeless or have other kinds of social problems, others because, like us at that time, they volunteer there. And then there was the community of *Spe Gaudentes* itself, twelve people, married or celibate, who had devoted themselves to this life permanently and were in charge.

I still remember our first evening prayer in the chapel, and especially how I was shocked to see that the lights from the sex theatre next door and the brothels across the canal gave the whole chapel a red hue. At the same time, the liturgy, more or less following the familiar daily office, had, to me, an intensity of meaning that was acquired by its being performed in this very strange context of red lights, tourists and prostitution.

We got invited to the coffee afterwards, with the declaration that 'the liturgy will be continued in the coffee room'. This coffee room has on its front door, visible only from the inside, the words '*ici entrent les envoyées de Dieu*' - here enter those sent by God. The room is decorated with a cross, some icons and other religious paintings, as well as some pictures of people who had lived there decades before. I remember how on that day, and also later when we came to live there, I sensed a 'faith-laden' atmosphere everywhere. Not because God or faith was a regular topic of conversation, but on the contrary, how the whole communal life including the material aspects of it seemed to breathe a tradition of faith that did not need explicit mention.

When we soon moved to live in this community, I was at the end of my theological studies. I still remember how, to my surprise, the new 'faith-laden' praxis in which I started to participate seemed to make certain hitherto important academic discussions about the historicity or the truth of credal statements fade away as irrelevant. Not that I was any more convinced of them than before - not at all. But, although I could not quite put my finger on it at that time, the questions started to strike me as wide of the mark.

¹ Known also as 'Oudezijds 100' which is in fact the name of the community's main house in Amsterdam, founded in 1953. At this moment, the community *Spe Gaudentes* consists of eleven members - Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant. Eight of them live in *Oudezijds 100*, together with their children, people who need help, and volunteers.

The turn to the church

In relating this, I tried to focus on some aspects of my experience of community life that can be interpreted quite well in the light of the 'turn to the church'. I will return to these experiences later on, but let me now first introduce this turn.

Milbank

The turn to the church as a new theological paradigm can be traced back to the '90s of the last century, and especially to John Milbank's foundational work, entitled *Theology and Social Theory* (1990). Here, Milbank argues that theology has to escape from the confines of a modern and secular epistemology. His long argument boils down to this: we modern people have learned to think in a way that seems very natural to us. We have the impression that our thinking rests on objective norms for rationality. But we can only experience our rational thoughts as 'natural', because we have been raised in a modern society which is artificially constructed to fit precisely this type of reasoning.

One of the most troubling aspects of this seemingly 'natural' way of thinking is, according to Milbank, the idea that knowledge of the world is possible without recourse to transcendent ideas. For instance, capitalist economy understands itself as the study of a completely immanent process of demand and supply, without needing to ask the difficult question of what a just distribution of goods is. Also, in our liberal democracies, rules are often understood as valid as long as they have been formally ratified; rather than being valid as long as they are promoting goodness or justice. But where questions regarding transcendent ideas are lost, all that is left is violent competition. Capitalism produces no saints, only winners; and a democracy without any transcendental idea of justice is finally the tyranny of the majority over the minority.

According to Milbank, we do not often think of these aspects as strange, because, in the last centuries, our whole society has been secularized in order to keep precisely those transcendental questions out. All kinds of formal and institutional mechanisms have been devised in order to keep controversial questions regarding truth or justice far away from economical or political sciences. Secular modernity, as a cultural phenomenon more than a program, has thus effectively, in practice and theory, separated the immanent and the transcendent. And it has postulated a world in which, finally, competition between individuals is the most basic explanation of all there is.

According to Milbank, the consequence for theology and Christianity has been devastating. Take for instance the fundamental Christian perspective of the world as a place of abundance of grace, in which you are God's gift to me, and in which we can become fully free and fulfilled only in relationship with our neighbour. This runs counter to the very fabric of the secular world which holds that competition is the final truth. Of course, it allows religious fanatics to build a community around the values of grace, peace and reconciliation, but it holds that these fanatics fail to see how the world really is: driven by competition, conflict and violence. The church is such a hopelessly naive community, and it is therefore, from a secular point of view, out of touch with the violent reality. In Milbank's words: secular reason has, by positing an ontology of violence, fundamentally opposed itself to the Christian ontology of peace.

Milbank concludes that theology cannot operate within the rationalistic demands of secular modernism. Therefore, he suggests that theology takes church praxis seriously again. For, as he believes, precisely in its practices, the church carries a more truthful understanding of this reality. Milbank turns to the church in order to find another epistemology, a worldview grounded not in an abstract theory of universal competition, but in a local praxis of communal peace and reconciliation.

Another proponent of this turn to the church is the American scholar Stanley Hauerwas. He agrees in general with Milbank's diagnosis, and basically follows him in his solution. In a Wittgensteinian fashion, he tries to answer the epistemological question 'how do we know', not by pointing to a universal and ahistorical rationality, but by claiming that people are culturally trained to understand the world in a certain way. Christianity offers such a culture, and therefore being Christian is not 'adhering to a philosophical position,' but it has to do with participation in a cultural praxis. A praxis that is primarily local, and consists of things like narrating certain stories, believing certain things, doing charitable works, treating others in a certain way, doing theology, linking all these activities to those certain stories, etcetera. All these practices cultivate virtues, form characters, and shape a certain understanding of the world and God.

Now, if Hauerwas is right and Christianity is not a philosophical position but first of all a praxis, we should accept his starting point: it is impossible to understand and criticize the meaning of Christianity by looking only to its theory. It does not make any sense for theologians to attempt to verify Christian beliefs according to the alien standards of secular rationality. This would naively ignore that Christian beliefs get their sense precisely in the praxis in which they are found, a praxis that carries with it its own rationality. Therefore, without the community of these people shaped by this particular tradition, the question of the truth of Christianity is rendered meaningless. In fact, only by getting your training in such a community - which is of course, in a general sense, the church - are you able to acquire the virtues necessary to see the truth of Christianity. The church is, according to this view, not simply a sociological necessity, a device that enables the truth of Christianity to be traditioned across time, but it is first and foremost an *epistemological* necessity. Without the formation that the church provides, it becomes impossible to understand its faith. So, if Christianity is true, without the church it becomes impossible to know the final truth about this world and God.

My communal experience in the light of the turn to the church

Now let us return to my first experiences at my community, from the intensity of meaning that I experienced during my first visit to the chapel in the red light district, to the slow shift of pressing theological questions while living in a 'faith-laden' atmosphere.

Milbank and Hauerwas could claim that my encounter with community life was an encounter with a different epistemology. Put more precisely, for I have been raised in the church, my encounter with the community *Spe Gaudentes* has made available a more intense configuration of practices than a regular parish could. This community provides me with the means necessary to understand myself and the world as being created, being given, being redeemed, being loved, etcetera; thus providing me with knowledge of God.

This explains why certain theological questions, even without getting a satisfactory rational answer, slowly seemed to lose their urgency to me. For instance, questions regarding the existence of God immediately touch upon our communal praxis - and thereby upon our most fundamental, almost bodily self-understanding as a community that tries to respond to God's calling- and our understanding of the world that is implied in this praxis. How could we similarly attempt to treat the other person at the most profound level of our actions and understanding as an 'envoyé de Dieu', while also seriously questioning the existence of the God who sent this person? What is at stake was suddenly not simply the correspondence between my individual personal convictions and the reality, but our common way of life.

Such experiences convince me that Milbank and Hauerwas are right in dismissing the division between the secular and the religious as an arbitrary construction. This division might, for someone raised in a secularized society, feel natural and logical. But in the context of our

communal praxis, this division quickly loses its explanatory power. Whenever I drink coffee, I am immersed in a social context which treats this act as the continuation of the liturgy; whenever I meet other people in our community, whether it is a smelly homeless guest or my academically qualified but annoying fellow community member, I am socialized, externally encouraged, to make an effort to treat this other person as an 'envoyé de Dieu'.

Some anthropologists and ritualists question whether such an alternative view on the world offers a real alternative. Should we not understand these practices as a temporary subversion of the secular order? Are churches and communities like mine not rather a place of liminality, at the margins of society, temporarily offering a deconstruction of everyday secular meaning? A temporary refuge and a place of consolation, without offering a viable alternative to the world?

Those who take the turn to the church vehemently reject this view. Milbank argues that the whole history of the church must be understood as an attempt to find, in practice, the ideal society, inspired by the vision of the City of God. Ecclesial practices are directed by a religious imagination of that *altera civitas*, and therefore can never be separate from politics.

This insight helped me to better understand our own policies. For example, in our community, everybody pays a certain rent for his own apartment. Even after painstaking attempts to make our rental system more transparent by basing the rental prices upon square metres and facilities of the apartment, we always end up making individual circumstances, including moral and religious deliberations, more decisive than this calculation. And we often believe that this approach makes it more just in the end. This particular communal practice is, in its exercise, in fact an attempt to craft an alternative policy to the blunt formality of our bureaucratic society, in which individual difference is forcefully overruled. A strictly secular and 'neutral' economical treatment of such issues is revealed here as the less sensitive to individual circumstances, and therefore as the less just. Milbank is right indeed: our communal praxis offers itself as a viable alternative to a crude secular policy, and as such, in practice, reveals that the secular division between religion and politics is not necessarily true.

Some concluding remarks

In the above, I tried to show how the recent theological turn to the church makes sense of community life. For now, I want to give some general conclusions and remarks.

To repeat, Milbank and Hauerwas argue that a praxis, rather than a theory, defines one's outlook on the world. We must understand Christianity not as a set of convictions about the world, but primarily as a praxis. Only by looking at how Christianity is lived out can one understand its meaning.

Therefore, from a Christian perspective, the alternative way of life that is developed and practised in the church, especially by means of monastic and religious communities, is fundamental to a proper understanding of the world and, finally, God. Without the daily forgiveness that is practiced in a community, without the lifelong *conversio morum*, without the constant liturgical reorientation to God, but also without the specific way of dealing with finances or any other daily business, the meaning of Christianity would risk obfuscation. What is more: the final and central Christian truth about how the world itself is being peacefully reconciled with God would be obscured.

In the end, this turn to the church means that monastic and other religious communities should not be viewed simply as places of refuge or liminality, even if they might sometimes take up this role. Rather, their attempt to put the imagination of the peaceful city of God into viable policies must be taken seriously as having fundamental implications for our secular society. Most importantly, it implies that the abundant violence of the world can always again be overcome.