

## Why Can't We All Just Get Along? A Theology of Conflict

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**Abstract:** In this text, I argue from a perspective of systematic theology that theology is, for conceptual and methodological reasons, necessarily a controversial enterprise: It is not a contingent fact but a reasonable expectation that religious and theological questions will be discussed controversially. I develop three arguments for this thesis: the argument from the distinction between faith and knowledge, the argument from the concept of religious truth and the argument from reasonable pluralism. These arguments support the assumption that theology is, as a hermeneutical discipline, bound to develop a culture of controversy. The necessity of controversy is not a liability but rather a methodological treasure: Controversiality is an important and indispensable part of the research process in Theology.

**Keywords:** Controversiality, Methods of Theology, Religious Truth, Reasonable Pluralism, Religious Convictions

**Zusammenfassung:** In diesem Text argumentiere ich aus einer Perspektive der systematischen Theologie, dass Theologie aus konzeptionellen und methodischen Gründen notwendigerweise ein kontroverses Unternehmen ist: Es ist keine kontingente Tatsache, sondern eine vernünftige Erwartung, dass religiöse und theologische Fragen kontrovers diskutiert werden. Für diese These entwickle ich drei Argumente: das Argument der Unterscheidung von Glauben und Wissen, das Argument des Begriffs der religiösen Wahrheit und das Argument des vernünftigen Pluralismus. Diese Argumente stützen die Annahme, dass die Theologie als hermeneutische Disziplin zwangsläufig eine Kultur der Kontroverse entwickeln muss. Die Notwendigkeit der Kontroversität ist keine Belastung, sondern ein methodologischer Schatz: Kontroversität ist ein wichtiger und unverzichtbarer Teil des Forschungsprozesses in der Theologie.

**Schlagwörter:** Kontroversität, Methoden der Theologie, Glaube, Religiöse Wahrheit, Vernünftiger Pluralismus, Religiöse Überzeugungen

### 1. The Schwerte Consensus lists controversiality as a core principle of Religious Education:

"Issues on which there are differing positions in theology, the church and society should be discussed controversially in RE. The prerequisite for this is that the positions do not contradict human rights or scientific knowledge that has been gained on the basis of common standards of rationality, methodology and argumentation. Controversies ad intra (i. e., the intra- and interreligious variety of religious traditions) as well as controversies ad extra (between religious and secular worldviews) should be considered." (<https://www.kommende-dortmund.de/schwerte-consensus>)

Controversiality thus seems to be a core pillar of theology and religion. But why is that the case? In how far is (Catholic) Theology different from other academic disciplines such as mathematics where there are a lot of issues which are not controversial at all? Is controversiality an important part of the research practices of (Catholic) Theology – or does it obstruct progress?

In this paper I will argue that controversiality is always a part of theological discourses and that this is not a contingent fact (because we by chance happen to live in pluralistic societies), but rather for conceptual reasons: It is a *reasonable expectation* to assume that theological topics will be discussed controversially. I will offer three major arguments for this thesis: The first argument is called the ‘Argument from the distinction between faith and knowledge’. It addresses the different conditions of justification regarding religious convictions and scientific convictions (1). The second argument is called the ‘Argument from the concept of religious truth’. It takes a closer look on what could be meant by ‘truth’ in the religious realm and argues that it is not reasonable to expect a widely shared consensus in religious matters, even though religious convictions necessarily entail truth claims (2). The third argument is called the ‘Argument from reasonable pluralism’. It makes use of the philosophical concept of ‘reasonable pluralism’ as it has been developed by John Rawls and draws certain conclusions for the reasonable controversiality of comprehensive doctrines (3).

The overall aim of the article is to show that theology is, for conceptual reasons, a culture of controversy in the sense that it is a hermeneutical science: It attempts to justify the rational acceptability of faith within the contexts of our time. It does not attempt to transform the act of faith either into non-controversial knowledge or non-controversial matters of taste. It is important to acknowledge that this necessity of controversiality is not a liability but rather a methodological treasure: Theology is an academic discipline which emphasizes the importance of discursive argumentation and which bridges the gap between theory and practice. Therefore, both theology at universities as well as Religious Education at schools remains an important part of the academic field as it may have huge impacts on the existential level of the individual and on the socio-cultural level of the modern societies we live in.

I am writing this paper as a systematic theologian, focusing primarily on epistemological considerations why theology is necessarily a culture of controversy. It is my hope that these theoretical reflections on the methodological status of theology will have some form of impact on practical theology as well. Controversiality is something that should be cherished, not something that should – or even could – be overcome when it comes to theological questions. So, let’s take a look at the arguments for the claims of this article.

## 2. Argument from the distinction between Faith and Knowledge

The first argument focuses on the distinction between faith and knowledge: Religious faith is different from ‘knowledge’ since it is primarily a practical interpretation of the world which nonetheless has cognitive elements. It is not something that can be empirically justified, nor is it something that can be proven like certain logical or mathematical truths. At the same time, religious faith usually strives for the rational justification of its contents – it is a ‘faith seeking understanding’, as Anselm put it a millennium ago. From its very beginnings, Christianity is very eager to show that it is not ‘yet another cult’ within the Roman Empire but rather a reasonable way of life whose rationality can be justified within the most advanced philosophical concepts of its times. This claim has been one of the major pillars of Christianity throughout the centuries. This epistemological juggling act finds its expression in the important distinction between the act of faith (*fides qua creditur*) and the content of faith (*fides quae creditur*).

In recent scholarship on the epistemic structure of religious convictions, this distinction has been taken up in the differentiation between *faith* and *belief* (Bishop & McKaughan, 2023). The concept of *faith* refers to the *practical dimension* of a religious view of the world: any such view does not seem to be exhausted in a merely theoretical commitment to the truth or adequacy of certain theistic or religious assumptions;

it rather seems to provide a comprehensive practical perspective on how to view the world and one's own existence. Religious faith has a regulative structure in that it provides a performative guidance and a perspective of orientation. Thus, a religious view of the world is a comprehensive practical attitude as opposed to a merely theoretical set of convictions. Religious convictions may therefore, in Wittgensteinian terms, be labelled as 'grammatical' since they seem to rule the way a religious citizen views the world (Stosch, 2019). However, the practical dimension of faith is usually accompanied by a dimension of *belief*. Religious convictions also display a *cognitive structure* and have *propositional content*. Religious beliefs are not only a practical attitude of trust, but also contain certain substantial propositions regarding, for instance, the existence and the attributes of God, his revelation, etc. It is therefore necessary to differentiate between the semantic content of religious convictions and their regulative function.

Both elements are equally constitutive of religious convictions. If Anna, for example, holds the conviction that a Trinitarian God has revealed his essence as unconditional love through Jesus, but does not deduce any practical impact on how to view and act in the world, we would hardly speak of an authentic religious conviction. Conversely, if Stephen says that he leads a Christian life but does not have any conviction on whether God exists, on his attributes, etc., we would again be hard put to assign religious faith to him. Thus, the twofold structure of religious convictions seems to be uncircumventable because it is implausible to speak of authentic religious conviction as soon as one of these two dimensions is missing. Neither the merely cognitive acknowledgment of a religious conviction nor a practical approach without any substantive view on the world is a coherent notion.

The twofold structure of religious convictions may explain why religious (or fiercely non-religious) citizens are remarkably resistant when their religious convictions are challenged: Usually, a religious citizen will not give up her faith even when she is confronted with atheist criticism, say with Feuerbach's projection thesis, which she, at least for now, fails to address and defeat. Conversely, an atheist citizen will not give up his faith when challenged with an argument for the existence of God, say Goedel's reformulation of Anselm's ontological argument, which he is equally not able to address and defeat at least for now. This is because of the twofold structure of religious convictions: They do not work like autonomous convictions which are solely based on rational insight and thus can (and must) be easily given up when encountering counter-evidence. However, this does not mean that religious convictions are not in need of rational justification: They also have a propositional content and claim universal validity for their assumptions, so that convincing reasons for their claims are required.

If this analysis of the epistemic structure of religious convictions is plausible, it is possible to sketch an intersubjective model of justification for religious beliefs. Intersubjective justification does not imply that it is possible to provide conclusive evidence for the objective truth of a religious statement. It rather claims that it is possible to rationally assess the reasons for and the reasons against the rational acceptability of a certain religious conviction. Christian faith is not opaque, but open for a rational reconstruction and a discursive justification of its contents.

Any intersubjective model of justification of religious beliefs requires cooperation between different religions and secular worldviews, and it requires a basis of argumentation which transcends the particular contexts of religious communities. It is possible to discursively share reasons on the rationality of monotheism, the nature of God, his attributes, etc. Even from the particular standpoint of a certain religious community, it is possible to recognize the rational plausibility of certain religious convictions of another religious (or secular) community. Religious faith manifests itself, among many other things and practices, in convictions with material content whose cogency and soundness should be justified *within a discourse oriented at mutual understanding*.

This brief outline might prove to be fruitful for theology as it helps to formulate a more nuanced distinction between *faith* and *knowledge*. Engaging in the Kantian turn towards the ‘practical faith of reason’, a religious view of the world may be described as a practical option in the face of ordinary existential questions rather than extraordinary cosmological queries. As Kant pointed out in his work on ‘Religion within the Boundary of Pure Reason’, religious convictions are not theoretical convictions in that they are part of metaphysical knowledge (Kant, 1838 [1791]). From a Kantian perspective, religious convictions are rather an *interpretation* of one’s existence than a cosmological *world view*. Interpretations of one’s existence are usually open for rational critique, but there cannot be conclusive theoretical evidence for (a-)theism in the form of proofs (or refutations) of God’s existence. Therefore, theology and metaphysics become a practical enterprise since metaphysical or religious convictions are no possible subjects of theoretical knowledge but performative utterances which give orientation in a complex world. In the words of Ingolf U. Dalferth:

„Metaphysics (...) is (...) the philosophical attempt to draw out a system of distinctions from the shared practices of orientation such as are met with in everyday life or in religious life and that help us to make sense of our life in this world. (...) Understood in this sense, metaphysics is not a theoretical or speculative enterprise but a practical one. Its task is not to offer ultimate explanations and to ‘explain the world’ in terms of its fundamental structure, but rather to provide schemes of ultimate existential orientation in terms of which we seek to orient ourselves in the complex situations of our life.“ (Dalferth, 2017, p.79)

The argument of the distinction between faith and knowledge thus shows that theology is necessarily a culture of controversy: It does not aim at a closed and unified metaphysical system in which there can be no reasonable doubts about its validity claims. Nor does it aim to isolate its discourses and shut off any controversy by claiming that they can only be assessed or even understood by the ‘inner circle’ of a particular religious language game. Rather, it attempts to justify the rational acceptability of religious convictions to believers and non-believers alike, being aware that their truth cannot be demonstrated. Religious faith can be a legitimate *interpretation of the world* and one’s own place in it, and such interpretation should be backed up with good reasons. However, the truth of such interpretations cannot be deduced theoretically. A religious interpretation of the world does not add something to our knowledge of the world – it rather interprets our knowledge of the world within a certain interpretative frame, and is thus bound to be controversial in free and pluralistic societies.

### 3. Argument from the concept of religious truth

The second argument of this article, which is called the ‘argument from the concept of religious truth’, spells out the consequences of the first argument with regard to what ‘truth’ could mean in religious statements. There are two implausible concepts when it comes to the concept of religious truth: Neither are religious convictions merely subjective or non-cognitive expressions of taste, nor are they entirely objective, theoretical descriptions of reality as such. If they were either of them, there would be no controversy since it is pointless to argue controversially about matters of taste or about provable facts which are true beyond reasonable doubt.

Let’s take a look at the first implausible concept: Quite obviously, religious statements aim for truth. They are not merely expressions of a certain taste or of a purely subjective set of emotions, but consist of convictions which claim to be rational: Religious convictions such as ‘God exists’ or ‘God has communicated himself in the incarnation’ claim that God *actually* exists and has *actually* communicated himself. Therefore, a sentence like ‘Chocolate ice cream is my favorite ice cream’ and a sentence like

'The essence of God is love' are very different. The former is an expression of subjective taste, the latter claims intersubjective validity. It does not make sense to contest the former sentence: Maybe I like that sort of ice cream and you like another one – but to exchange arguments and try to convince the other that she is wrong would be pointless. It does, however, make sense to contest the latter sentence: It is controversial to claim that God's essence is love, and there are a lot of areas where such a statement would be disputed: in interreligious dialogue, in a debate with atheists, in a conflict with fundamentalist Christians, etc. The decisive point is: There can be a meaningful exchange of arguments, and defenders of the claim that God's essence is love can attempt to show that this sentence is rationally justifiable.

Now, let's take a look at the second implausible concept. It is also quite obvious that a sentence like 'Water is H<sub>2</sub>O' is different from a sentence like 'God exists'. The former sentence is an expression of theoretical knowledge of the world, the latter expresses an attitude to the world. The justification conditions for the statements 'God exists' and 'Water is H<sub>2</sub>O' are fundamentally different: 'Water is H<sub>2</sub>O' is an empirical truth that can be tested using scientific methods and whose falsification conditions are clear-cut. 'God exists' is a deeply formative conviction that profoundly shapes one's own perspective on the world. If we assume that there would be new evidence suggesting that water is actually not H<sub>2</sub>O, it would not be very hard to change our conviction that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Descriptive convictions can be changed quickly in the face of new evidence. Religious convictions, however, seem to be peculiarly resistant to evidence that causes changes in empirical beliefs. This is not because religious people are particularly stubborn (atheists are equally resistant to change their atheistic convictions), but because religious convictions are not constative statements about the world. They do not aim for empirical knowledge, but for a practical understanding of our place in the world.

For modern theologies, it is thus essential to acknowledge that religious truths are not part of a form of theoretical knowledge, but rather practical and performative presuppositions of religious life forms. This stance has not always been shared: In the history of philosophy and theology, there have been numerous attempts, for example, to prove the existence of God. If such a proof were possible, it would be a matter of theoretical knowledge whether to assume that God exists or that he does not exist – and as soon as such a proof would exist, the question of whether God exists would not be controversial anymore. However, the project of proving the existence of God has become increasingly unpopular within Christian theology. There are two reasons for that: *Philosophically*, it is questionable to what extent it is even appropriate to consider religious beliefs as provable beliefs that are part of 'knowledge'. *Theologically*, it would also have problematic consequences if it were possible to prove God: the question of whether one should believe in God would then not be a free human decision, but a question of prudence. The relationship between God and human beings could then not be a personal relationship of love, but would have to be thought of as a hierarchical relationship between master and servant. Therefore, the failure of all proofs of the existence of God is theologically unproblematic: the fact that there are good objections to all known proofs of God does not mean that belief in God is irrational – this would simply be a logical fallacy. Rather, contemporary theology has accepted the challenge to formulate new ways of justification for religious faith beyond the classical theoretical proofs of God. These new ways do not aim at the theoretical provability of God, but at the rational justifiability of belief in God. The latter, however, will not be able to escape controversiality.

If neither the concept of religious truth as a matter of taste nor as a matter of knowledge is convincing, a middle ground between these two implausible approaches is required. Such middle ground can be found in a cognitive approach to religious truth which regards this concept as a practical one: It is particularly promising to spell out a notion of religious truth which regards religious truth claims as performative and practical claims. In this approach, religious truth claims are not regarded as theoretical descriptions which correspond to a certain reality, but rather as practical interpretations of reality. These interpretations claim to be true, and their truth can be argued for and against – that is why there will

always be controversiality when it comes to these existential issues or, as Thomas Nagel coined them, “mortal questions” (Nagel, 2013). Rather than speculating about the basic structure of the cosmos or the ‘furniture of reality’, theology is set to tackle problems ‘on the go’, i. e. as they arise from the everyday practice of human beings.

Such a shift towards practical reason is primarily relevant for the mode of justification of religious beliefs. If they are not supposed to be speculative cosmologies but rather existential interpretations of lifeworldly events, they do not only (and not even primarily) make a validity claim for the truth of their content, but mainly for the rightness and truthfulness of a certain practice which is inevitably connected to their content. Religious interpretations of one’s existence do not address the question ‘What can I know?’, but rather the questions ‘What should I do?’ and ‘What may I hope?’. The justification of religious belief in a postmetaphysical setting does not consist in a collection of theoretical evidence in favor of a cosmological *worldview*, but rather in a discursive evaluation of religious practices and convictions which originate in the *lifeworld*. Taking a religious stance towards the world does not merely mean to hold true a speculative cosmology, it rather refers to a certain form of existential coping with the contingencies of life. The task of such a postmetaphysically framed philosophical theology would consist in the rational justification of the propositional architecture behind that practice instead of drafting and defending a cosmological worldview. This is similar to the task of philosophy, as Habermas describes it: Philosophy (and, we may well add, theology) “should continue to pursue a comprehensive claim to promote the rational understanding of self and the world of contemporary generations” (Habermas, 2023, p.6).

The middle ground between expression-of-taste and theoretical knowledge therefore boils down to a form of ‘practical metaphysics’. Practical metaphysics seeks answers to metaphysical questions from the practice of human life and thus has an *interpretative character* (Schnädelbach, 2015, p.151f.). Practical metaphysics *does not* generate *new knowledge* about the world, but *interprets* certain contexts of events by drawing on the knowledge of the world gathered by the sciences. A ‘practical metaphysics’ is therefore committed to the Kantian critique of speculative knowledge about God, freedom, immortality or the unity of the world. However, it does not follow from this critique that metaphysical questions are meaningless, but rather that such concepts cannot be objectified and that statements about their nature can count as part of human knowledge. Human beings cannot have theoretical certainty when it comes to religious matters, but they can have compelling reasons for the rationality of a life practice:

“For it is a distinguishing feature of the ‘reasonable faith’, which can derive a certain degree of religious certainty from this, that it is aware of the limits of reason when it comes to falsifying religious convictions, ultimately because it believes that there is an unbridgeable difference between a *divine* and the *human* perspective, which implies that human faith cannot have perfect knowledge of a divine reality. This does not mean that ethical, moral or theoretical discourses cannot give rise to religious uncertainties, but it does mean that external doubts concerning fundamental religious convictions do not necessarily give rise to such uncertainties. Faith cannot provide ‘ultimate’ proofs but it does *trust in* ‘ultimate’ reasons, even though these are fully accessible only to the faithful.” (Forst, 2013, p.492)

The ‘Argument from the concept of Religious Truth’ thus shows that it is both possible and fruitful to debate theological questions controversially, in contrast to theoretical knowledge and matters of taste: It is not really possible to debate matters of theoretical knowledge controversially – if someone, for example, attempts to contest the notion that ‘ $2+2=4$ ’, we usually do not have a lot of patience as such a notion is simply not a controversial one. Whenever something has been proven theoretically, human beings do not have a choice but to accept this as true – and if some human beings don’t, we usually start questioning their rationality but not the proven fact. And although it is possible that there are controversies when it comes to matters of taste, it is not really fruitful to debate them – individual taste

varies very much, and it is a matter of subjective preferences only. Thus, the really controversial questions are usually existential, moral or religious questions as they might be attacked and defended by rational arguments without the option to escape well-founded doubts.

#### 4. Argument from the 'Fact of Reasonable Pluralism' in postsecular societies

The third and final argument of this text in favor of the necessity of controversiality in religion and theology is called the 'argument from the fact of reasonable pluralism'. It starts with a very simple diagnosis: Western societies are deeply pluralistic. John Rawls, one of the most important thinkers in political philosophy, has paradigmatically described modern democratic societies as being shaped by the '*fact of reasonable pluralism*': It is to be expected that there will be a multitude of worldviews, religious or non-religious, if human beings are free to choose their worldview (Rawls, 1996, pp.47-88). It is not to be expected that there will be unanimous consensus on which religion or which 'comprehensive doctrine' is the most rational one. This fact of reasonable pluralism then leads Rawls to the problem which motivates his entire book on 'Political Liberalism'. It is the so-called 'stability problem': "How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" (Rawls, 1996, xxv).

It is important to see that the fact of reasonable pluralism is not a proof of the irrationality of human beings but rather something that is to be expected when human beings are allowed to use their rationality freely. It would be a strange expectation to assume that everyone will swing towards the exact same interpretation of life if they are given religious freedom. Robert Talisse points out this expectation in a pluralist society succinctly: „[T]he fact of persistent and deep disagreement over fundamental moral doctrines is not in itself an indication of deeply entrenched irrationality; in other words, we are committed to the idea that sane, intelligent, sincere, and informed persons can come to hold different (and opposing) moral doctrines“ (Talisse, 2009, p.13).

There is an important lesson to be learned from the fact of reasonable pluralism as this very fact of reasonable pluralism should be taken seriously as an epistemological challenge: In pluralist societies, religious convictions are embedded in inescapably diverse contexts. This, however, increases the pressure to justify oneself: a specific religious interpretation of the world is no longer without alternative, and (religious) faith becomes one option among many. Charles Taylor describes a change within societies according to which it was "virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable" (Taylor, 2007, p.25). The question of faith and rationality is located within pluralistic societies, which is why it becomes even more important to give good reasons for one's religious interpretation of life. Additionally, a stable criteriology is needed in order to reassure oneself of the *reasonableness* of pluralism and at the same time to identify unreasonable interpretations of the self and the world. This is the only way to distinguish reasonable pluralism from an arbitrary and criterion-free 'uniformity' in which all worldviews are equally valid and a decision between them becomes existentially insignificant.

At this point we may make a turn towards the important debate on the limits of controversiality: At which point do we have to stop to regard certain positions as being part of the spectrum of legitimate controversial convictions? Which criteria might be used to distinguish legitimate positions from those that cannot be tolerated – e.g. racist, sexist or fascist positions? As a systematic theologian, I do not have enough expertise to go into a detailed discussion of this debate in practical theology. All I can say is that this debate bears striking resemblances to the philosophical debate on the limitations of tolerance (cf. the detailed discussion of a non-arbitrary and justifiable setting of the limits of toleration in Forst, *Toleration in Conflict*, pp.543-573). The Schwerte Consensus parallels the two major criteria in the



debate on toleration: Two boundaries of controversy consist in the non-contradiction of human rights and of scientific knowledge.

These epistemological consequences of the fact of reasonable pluralism echo in Habermas's famous considerations on the role of religion in a post-secular society. Habermas and Rawls have engaged in important debates regarding liberal political theory. Although they were largely sympathetic to each other, Habermas emphasized the deliberative structure of democracy a lot more than Rawls, who put more emphasis on the structure of liberal rights within a constitutional state (Finlayson, 2019). As Rawls died in 2002, he was not able to react to Habermas's writing on post-secular societies and the role of religion in public debates – that would have been an extremely interesting sequel to the Rawls-Habermas-debate.

The term 'post-secular society' has sometimes led to certain confusions: This expression does not indicate that the times of secular societies are over – quite to the contrary, Habermas expects an ongoing secularization of Western societies. He uses the label 'post-secular society' to describe important changes when it comes to assessing the future role of religions: Habermas denies the truth of the secularization thesis which stated that the more modern a society becomes, the less religious it will be. Religions are therefore bound to simply phase out of the history of mankind. Habermas, who defended this thesis in his earlier writings, now doubts that this prognosis is correct. He rather claims that "today the public consciousness in Europe can be described as that of a 'post-secular society' that is adapting to the fact that religious communities continue to exist in a context of ongoing secularization" (Habermas, 2023, p.52).

At the same time, Habermas is not only concerned with describing a changing sociological mindset, but also with a new philosophical examination of the cognitive content of religious traditions. He argues that a secularist attitude of superiority should be replaced by an attitude that is open to learning and dialogue, as religious traditions are considered to be cognitively rich and politically and philosophically relevant: Religious utterances in the public may have a lasting relevance for a liberal constitutional state as they might be important and vital features of democratic discourse. These features would be lost if the liberal state adopted a strict doctrine of privatization of religion. The secular state profits from religious utterances in the public sphere as they provide public discourse with important 'semantic resources' that might help to overcome the pathologies of modernity:

"[R]eligious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization have caused utter devastation. Who is to say that they do not contain encoded semantic potentialities that could provide inspiration if only their message were translated into rational discourse?" (Habermas, 2008, p.6)

According to Habermas, religious convictions may thus contain encapsulated resources and moral insights which are necessary to cope with a neoliberal, naturalistic and depoliticized zeitgeist. This is the point where Habermas and Johann Baptist Metz find a lot of common ground. For Metz, faith is always, perhaps even primarily, a political practice:

"The faith of Christians is a praxis in history and society that is to be understood as hope in solidarity in the God of Jesus as a God of the living and the dead who calls all men to be subjects in his presence. (...) In this praxis, they [Christians] resist the danger both of a creeping evolutionary disintegration of the history of men as subjects and of an increasing negation of the individual in view of a new post-middle-class image of man." (Metz, 1980, p.73)

The entire point of such a self-description of the faith of Christians would become vain if it was a presupposition of liberal societies that religious citizens must privatize their religious beliefs and



thereby make them uncontroversial private matters. The major world religions do not view themselves as being private matters – rather, they have a public, a political dimension. They are not only resources for individual resilience, but rather aim to further the normative self-understanding of human beings. As this self-understanding, however, is always questionable and never once-and-for-all-settled, religious faith (and theology as the academic reflection of this faith) is bound to be a controversial enterprise.

In short, the epistemological foundations of a pluralist and post-secular society show that one can defend the rationality of one's own interpretation of life while at the same time recognizing that other interpretations may be justified with good and rational reasons as well. As Rainer Forst puts it: "For it is still possible to regard one's own route to faith as the most reasonable provided that one is ready not to elevate it above all others as the only one which can be objectively demonstrated by rational means, so that objections against it would have to be regarded as per se irrational" (Forst, 2013, p.483). In other words: Religious faith is bound to be controversial in pluralistic societies, and this controversy is a good thing from a theological perspective: It allows both for a rational justification of one's own religious interpretation of the world as well as for a recognition of other religious or non-religious interpretations of the world.

## 5. Epilogue: Controversiality as methodological treasure of theology

The three arguments that I have presented all come to the same conclusion: Controversiality is necessarily a part of theology. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this is not only true of theology, but of a religious interpretation of the world (Gruber, Schüssler & Bobrowicz, 2024). As soon as diverse interpretations of one's own existence compete in a pluralistic society, there will be dissent and conflicts regarding these interpretations. Gruber et al. are therefore correct when stating that "conflict and disagreement are constitutive of the ecclesial community" (Gruber et al., 2024, p.5). They are also correct when claiming that this is not a condition which is to be lamented and to be overcome by asserting a strict ecclesial hierarchy, but rather a condition which proves to be fruitful for a deeper understanding of one's own view of the world as well as for an attitude of tolerance towards those who have competing views of the world. Thus, controversiality is a methodological treasure: It is something that should be cherished, not something that should be overcome. It allows for a deeper understanding of one's own identity as it is not the only possible option to interpret one's life, but a conscious and at least partly rational choice.

Therefore, the fact that theology is a culture of controversy should be welcomed both in systematic and in practical theology. RE is therefore an important part of the school curriculum as it helps to understand that comprehensive interpretations of the world (be they religious or not) are bound to be controversial. This insight helps to foster tolerance among religions: No religion in the world is in possession of a God's eye point of view or of perfect knowledge of the divine (Breul, 2024). Although the achievement of tolerance is not an automatism (cf. the nuanced discussion in Herbst, 2023), RE can help to further understanding between religions and to promote the insight that one's own faith is neither purely subjective or a-rational nor purely objective and generalizable.

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