Can an appeal to spirituality bridge cultural and religious gaps?

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1. Introduction

The goal of this paper can be stated with help of a slight change in the formulation of its title.[1] It then reads: *how* can we understand the concept of spiritualty in such a way that it helps in bridging gaps between religions and cultures? In our age of terrorism the *practical* side of religious conflicts is obvious, but they also have a *theoretical background*. It can be seen when we look at two positions that influence our view of what can or cannot be done to resolve them: *ethnocentrism* and *relativism*.

Ethnocentrism is the view that it is *only my own religion* (or, more broadly speaking, my *own culture*) that tells me what the world is like, what a good human life should be and what expressions like 'spirituality' and 'religion' mean. Some versions of this view even claim that only my own religion should properly be signified by this term.

Today, however, most educated persons find ethnocentrism inacceptable. But it is worthwhile noting that it might have developed from an idea that has a grain of truth in it. It is this: The first apprehensions of what the world is like and what a good life should be grow from the experiences we have of our closest social environment at a very early age. These experiences are closely connected to our early *emotional* life and to the first steps of developing an identity. Therefore one can say that the *first* understanding of life is a *particular* understanding. It is the one that we ourselves have developed of what it means to be human. It is at first mostly *implicit* but will soon be *articulated* in many different ways, for example by stories about living beings of which some scare us while with others we identify. This first understanding will influence our outlook for the rest of our lives, regardless of our later contacts with other perspectives. We can see from this that there is a 'natural' tendency to ethnocentrism. But to admit this fact does not mean that we cannot or should not later learn *about* and *from* other cultures and religions.

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[1] A more detailed discussion of some of the views that are sketched in this paper can be found in Schneider 2006, in my book (Schneider 2008, in German) and in some recent papers: Schneider 2016, 2017a, 2017b.

In contradistinction, *relativism* is a position that is aware of the imperialist, the violent side of ethnocentrism, and, more generally, is aware of the dangers of refusing to consider as potentially valuable perspectives that are different from one's own. Relativism, therefore, can be said to aim at overcoming the negative sides of clinging to one's early conceptions. It urges to respect other cultures by tentatively stepping back from one's own convictions, by taking serious the dangers of prejudices, i.e. of the limitations we have without being aware of them.

Characterized in this way, relativism is the more respectable of the two positions because of its readiness to learn. It is a form of tolerance; it tries to get an unbiased picture. But, as the dubious position of ethnocentrism may have grown out of an idea that has a *positive* side, so the philosophically more respectable position of relativism can develop a *negative* side. This happens when it is understood as including the claim that it is impossible to seriously discuss the merits and faults of different views of human life as they are articulated in different religions. Then tolerance can easily become indifference.

This move towards indifference seems to be supported by the high esteem we today have for the (natural) sciences. It can lead to the conviction that the traditional forms of articulating what life is all about are outdated, are something to be abandoned. Then it is taken to be a matter of enlightenment to eliminate the traditional forms of religious articulations from academic as well as political discussions. This, I think, is a philosophical and also a political mistake.

So the claim of this paper is that both the imperialistic version of ethnocentrism and the indifference version of relativism are misguided. In this evaluation I am following an argument developed by Charles Taylor in his discussion about a "language of perspicuous contrast".[2] He shares the common critique of ethnocentrism, but, as a defender of a 'hermeneutic' or 'understanding' approach in the field of social studies, he also criticizes relativism because (as he rightly says) this position cannot even adequately *state* what the *topics* are that are treated in the articulations of a culture we do not understand.

My aim in this paper is to take one further step and to argue that considerations we find in the philosophy of language of the later Wittgenstein will strengthen Taylor's position, namely, that also in religious studies an *understanding* approach is necessary as well as possible. Wittgenstein's thought will shed some more light on the nature of what this approach involves. In this way it will also help to understand why intercultural conflicts go so deep and can so easily become irrational and even violent.

2. The concepts 'spirituality' and 'religion'

If, for the sake of interreligious dialogue, we have given up ethnocentrism and allow the possibility of a multitude of different social institutions that despite considerable differences in doctrines and non-linguistic activities deserve to be called *religions*, we must be able to say what it is that makes them all specimens of one phenomenon. The answer cannot be given in terms of one *particular* religion. For example we cannot simply say that they all are about one and the same transcendent being that in Christianity is called God, because we know (firstly) that there are religions (like for example certain forms of

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[2] Taylor 1981, 205; 2002, 287.

Buddhism) that do not have the idea of such a god and because (secondly) it is not at all clear what it would mean to say that two different religions refer to the same god although they are using two different names for this purpose. Moreover and more generally: In the *Philosophy* of Religion it is a *logical* mistake to use the vocabulary of any one *particular* religion to define all the others. We need a more neutral term if what we aim at is a truly open intercultural dialogue about what religion is and in what religions can differ.

In this situation the term *spirituality* is used to signify a dimension of human life, of which particular religions with their particular ways of expressing themselves are *articulations*. In using this term the speaker tries to avoid all *particular* forms in which this dimension gets articulated and in this way tries to avoid ethnocentrism. But how can we see to it that a very abstract term like *spirituality* will not be empty, how can we give to it a meaning that is (one the one hand) sufficiently clear and that (on the other hand) is not restricted to articulations of just one *particular* religion?

One type of answer to this question is to name *a function* that all religions share, instead of naming *an object* or a *person* that is treated by all of them. Sometimes non-theistic names like *the Transcendent* or *the Numinous* are used here, but like the expression *the Spiritual* they are problematic because of the danger of emptiness. So it is promising to look for a common *function* of religions, not for an entity (concrete or abstract) that they are *about*. There must be some common human concern if an attempt to compare different ways in which it is realized is to be meaningful.

So what I am proposing here *is* a functionalism, but it is of a somewhat special kind. For it characterizes the function of religion not in terms of a *view from outside its own concerns*, not in terms for example of sociology or psychology. Instead, it attempts to speak from the point of view of a person who herself tries to articulate a spiritual outlook. I will for this reason call it an *existential functionalism*.

How this is possible might be seen from two tentative definitions, one of *the spiritual dimension* of life, and secondly, building on this, a definition of religion.

   (1) The spiritual dimension of human life is what gets into view when an attempt is made to achieve an understanding *of* and an attitude *towards* human life as a whole, an understanding that is honest and truthful. This includes seeing and accepting those sides of life that are mysterious to us. Also, such an account must not close its eyes to life's unpleasant sides, like suffering, sickness, and death, and the feelings of fear and despair these sides might cause. Last but not least it must also include what Rudolf Otto [3] has called the 'fascinating' side of the sacred.

   (2) Religions then can be defined as specific articulations and practices that according to their own ambitions, *articulate*, and *practically help* their followers to achieve and sustain such an understanding of human life. Religions, moreover, typically entail the promise that to identify with their understanding of life will be helpful. In the best cases this will bring to their followers a deep form of peace. What this means can best be explained in the words of William James who characterizes it as "a superior denomination of happiness, and a steadfastness of soul with which no other can compare."[4]

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[3] Otto 1963.
[4] James 1982, 369.

Let me mention in passing that it is the absence of this practical side of helping their disciples to lead their personal lives that today most clearly separates philosophies from religions.

3. Articulations vs. theories

When we now turn to linguistic religious articulations and what we might learn from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, the first important point to be mentioned is that, according to Wittgenstein, what gets articulated in religious doctrines are *not theories* or *descriptions* in a sense as they are at home in the sciences. When we think of cosmology and evolutionary biology we may well say that these together try to treat *the whole world*. But when we make the same claim about a religion, we mean something quite different, namely that *the whole lives* of the people addressed are the subject matter of its articulations, more exactly, their lives *as experienced by themselves*. And this is not what the sciences are about. They aim at giving an objective, detached description. The help they offer is mostly of the *technical*, not of the *existential* kind.

And if indeed what religious teachings articulate are not theories, these articulations can neither aim at finding an all-encompassing *theoretical* account of this world, nor can the *conflicts* between religious articulations be resolved in the manner in which conflicts between scientific theories are resolved. For the same reason, religious conflicts cannot have their roots in the fact that their teachings are *incommensurable* in the sense discussed in the philosophy of science.[5]

In the short time provided in our context is not possible to discuss more than just one detail for substantiating the outlines given so far. My chosen example is an important change in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, namely, a change in his attitude to pictorial ways of speaking. This is a theme that is clearly of central importance for understanding religious articulations.

In his *Lecture on Ethics*, a text that in many respects belongs to his *early* philosophy, we find the following reasoning. Wittgenstein had imagined that his interlocutor might raise an objection to his claim that language cannot express what he calls 'the higher'. These higher things are what disciplines like Ethics, Aesthetics, and Religion are attempting to treat. As an example of such an attempt he mentions that in a religious context he himself feels inclined to say something like 'I feel absolutely safe'.[6] But he has second thoughts about this, and, still using the science-oriented criteria put up in his *Tractatus*,[7] considers this sentence in is religious meaning to be nonsensical.

Wittgenstein then imagines his interlocutor to object in the following way. The sentence, the partner would say, should not be taken in a literal sense, but should be taken as a simile; then it might no longer be nonsensical. But Wittgenstein rejects this objection. At the time when he wrote the *Lecture*, he claimed that a simile, if meaningful, must be translatable into a literal expression. And for this literal expression to be meaningful he demands that it be about a 'state of affairs' in the science-oriented sense he had sketched in the *Tractatus*. In a next step he correctly observes that a fulfillment of this require-

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[5] Cf. Schneider 2017a.
[6] Wittgenstein 1965, 8.
[7] Wittgenstein 1922.

ment would have as a consequence that the sentence in question would no longer convey the intended 'higher' meaning, but instead would say something about a state of mind as a physical state of affairs.[8] So in his *Lecture* Wittgenstein claimed that there is *something we cannot do* with the help of language, namely, to express something higher.[9] If this were so, this fact would strengthen relativism because it puts spiritual contents out of our critical reach.

When we now look at his later work as documented in the *Philosophical Investigations* we find that Wittgenstein has changed his mind on these points.[10] Now he has something quite different to say about the workings of pictorial language and the limits of what language can do:

> "The great difficulty here is not to present the matter as if there were something one *couldn't* do. As if there really were an object, from which I extract a description, which I am not in a position to show anyone. – And the best that I can propose is that we yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate what the *application* of the picture looks like." (PI § 374)[11]

So instead of keeping quiet and resisting the temptation to say something he had thought to be nonsensical, and instead of trying to offer a translation into a language that would be acceptable from a *Tractatus* point of view (which he takes his interlocutor to be proposing but which he thinks to be impossible), but also instead of claiming that there is a special field of mystical objects of which we might have some kind of private knowledge or even a private description, but about which we just cannot speak in our shared human language, he now says that we should *yield to the* mentioned *temptation*. We should speak in the way we felt inclined to, and this means that we should trust that pictorial language can be meaningful, - although its way of having meaning is different from the ways allowed in the *Tractatus*: It does not rest on a relation between an object and its name.

So the next step for Wittgenstein is not to look for an object, but to "investigate what the *application* of the picture looks like". Speaking in this way of *the application of a picture* implies that in the kind of investigation he now proposes we should not isolate a constituent word from the place it occupies in a complex pictorial phrase and then try to answer follow-up questions about the meaning of just this word (for example 'God') with the understanding that explaining the meaning demands that we can point to something that this word names. With this move Wittgenstein points to the possibility that *different* pictures that are at home in different cultures and religions may have a *similar* use in various attempts that human beings in different parts of the world have made to come to terms with their condition. And this means, according to the definitions given above: In our human attempts of articulating the spiritual dimension of life quite different pictorial articulations might fulfill similar existential functions.

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[8] "But what I mean is that a state of mind, so far as we mean by that a fact which we can describe, is in no ethical sense good or bad." (Wittgenstein 1965: 6).

[9] In the *Tractatus* we read: „Propositions cannot express anything higher." (Wittgenstein 1922: 6.42).

[10] Wittgenstein 2009.

[11] „Die große Schwierigkeit ist hier, die Sache nicht so darzustellen, als *könne* man etwas nicht. Als wäre da wohl ein Gegenstand, von dem ich die Beschreibung abziehe, aber ich wäre nicht im Stande, ihn jemandem zu zeigen. – Und das Beste, was ich vorschlagen kann, ist wohl, daß wir der Versuchung, dies Bild zu gebrauchen, nachgeben: aber nun untersuchen, wie die *Anwendung* dieses Bildes aussieht."

4. Conclusion: Learning to be human

In conclusion I would like to name the most important consequences that the sketched understanding of spirituality will have for closing gaps between religions and cultures. (1) We have seen that to understand the application of pictorial expressions as wholes is a necessary step in those cases of intercultural communication that are close to religious matters. We have also (2) seen that language games involving such expressions are acquired in life quite early, when identities are first build and when the experiences made have strong emotional meanings. Therefore, it is to be expected that the people who have been brought up by them embrace these pictures with great tenacity. *Thirdly* we can understand that in the case of *conflicts between competing pictures* these cannot be resolved by putting them together to form one single encompassing picture. Here we might think of the Christian conception of a *last judgment*, as compared to the Buddhist conception of a favorable or not so favorable rebirth: These are *alternative* pictures, they cannot be just added one to the other; they are not *horizons* that could be *fused* (Gadamer). And, *fourthly*, we have seen that the methods we have for resolving conflicts between scientific theories are not applicable in cases of religious conflicts. These points taken together help to understand (but not to justify) the readiness to use force in religiously inspired conflicts.

What then can we learn from Wittgenstein's considerations when the goal is to understand the theoretical questions on the way to avoid violence in religious and cultural matters? The answer emerging from the considerations presented here is the following: We have to learn to combine two things: On the one hand we have to be able to use pictorial expressions seriously for the articulation of our own existential questions and aspirations. This will avoid the indifference-version of relativism. But on the other hand we should also avoid that the pictures we are using in these attempts of self-articulation (in Wittgenstein's words) *hold us captive*.[12] We should not become the slaves of our own pictorial expressions. If we succeed in this, we avoid ethnocentrism by having gained some *freedom* in our relation to these pictures, *without giving them up*. We then can understand and we can take seriously perspectives that are articulated in pictorial languages that are foreign to us.

To train this freedom, I propose, is part of what the phrase 'learning to be human' means. What is at stake here can be seen in a remark of Charles Taylor I would like to quote to end my presentation. Taylor, as you might know, is a Roman Catholic, and the sentence to be quoted is taken from his discussion of certain cruel rites of sacrifice that the Spaniards were confronted with when they encountered the Aztec culture:

> "But that the Mass and Aztec sacrifice belong to rival construals of a dimension of the human condition for which we have no stable, culture-transcendent name is a thought we cannot let go of, unless we want to relegate these people to the kind of unintelligibility that members of a different species would have for us."[13]

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[12] PI § 115.
[13] Taylor 2002, 294.

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