Chapter 8
The Demarcation Problem of Knowledge and Faith: Questions and Answers from Theology

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Clashes of knowledge and faith! Currently, most people probably associate this phrase with images of narrow-minded fundamentalist creationists, or even with fundamentalist hate-preachers, with burning cars and dead bodies, with people killed by religiously motivated terrorists. The question is whether in cases like these it is really adequate to speak of a clash between realms of knowledge and whether it is adequate to attribute "faith" instead of fanaticism as the motivating force to hate-preachers and terrorist murderers. In such extreme cases, it has to be acknowledged that ideological and even pathological worldviews are beyond any areas of knowledge and beyond attitudes that can be connected with faith. In short, my first question is how seriously the term *knowledge* is taken in the title of the conference. Does the word bear a strong cognitive connotation—as in my view it should? If so, it is necessary to concentrate on problems other than the "hot" clashes between ideological and terrorist worldviews and mentalities and religiously and politically educated and civilized ones. I do not mean that the "cooler" problems I bring to attention in this text are less complicated. They do not seem to be as explosive as the examples mentioned above, but in malicious ways they are highly erosive.

In Western cultures, most of the problems with demarcating knowledge and faith seem to have been solved by efficient and peaceful modes of segmentation. I am a Christian; you are a Buddhist. He is a Jew; they are Muslims. He is a physicist; she studies German literature; and so on. These segmentations can be further refined: We are Christians, but I am a Lutheran and he is Orthodox. Or still further segmented, I am a Swabian pietist Lutheran; he is a conservative Russian Orthodox. He is not just a physicist, but an astrophysicist; she is specialized in German medieval literature. With these segmentations people operate peacefully in the spaces of knowledge and faith. He is a physicist and also an active Roman Catholic; she is interested in religious medieval literature, but she no longer practices in the Episcopalian tradition.

These refined views on fellow human beings in their participation in the spheres of knowledge and faith permit efficient and tactful, in short, adequate communication and interaction. To be sure, simple generalistic dualities such as "faith and reason" or "faith and knowledge" are still used in popular attempts to make sense of the world. In rather primitive perceptions, faith belongs to the

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areas of church, worship, and personal piety, whereas reason and knowledge belong to the areas of the academy, of research and education. However, beyond this level of very rough common-sense observations, simple dualities such as faith and reason or faith and knowledge are not capable of solving the problems of demarcating territories and boundaries of knowledge, at least not at an academic level and in environments that are shaped by nonfundamentalist religiosity. I argue that such dualities can be highly deceptive—at least in Euro-American environments shaped by Jewish-Christian traditions as well as European modernity.

The passion for insight and education characteristic of nonmystical and nonfundamentalist Jewish and Christian theology and piety discourages all attempts to supplement and support the duality of faith and knowledge with dualities such as "subjective and objective knowing," "emotional and rational attitude," or "relation to the invisible and the visible." As the long cooperation between theologians and scientists has shown, even the latter duality—the relation to the invisible and the visible—definitely collapses in the scientific realm when it comes to quantum theory (Polkinghorne & Welker, 2000).

In religious and academic communities alike, people have to deal with a set of sophisticated combinations and mixtures between trust and cognitive learning. Both groups regard themselves as "truth-seeking communities," an expression for which I am indebted to the Cambridge physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne (Polkinghorne, 1994, p. 149; 2000, pp. 29–30; Polkinghorne & Welker, 2001, pp. 139–148). The demarcation problem is thus how to differentiate between the cognitive and moral attitudes of the two communities and between their attempts to validate claims to truth and to seek an enhancement of their specific types of knowledge.

In Euro-American modernity the problem with clashes of knowledge has to be reformulated as follows: The interest in an educated faith has created a strange fusion between faith and knowledge. In order to differentiate faith from knowledge and yet preserve this fusion, modern faith has found a form that I would like to call *subjectivist faith*. It locates faith in an abstract form of self-reference. I show that this move gives faith a powerful latent pattern—and at the same time makes it empty and speechless and generates increasing self-secularization and self-banalization.

In this contribution I first analyze the structure and procedure of truth-seeking communities. In the second part, I characterize a dominant form of faith in Western societies and cultures. This form explains the strange fact that there is a high percentage of people who formally belong to the churches but that there is the constant affirmation of a spiritual hunger among people in Western societies and that they are simultaneously experiencing a strong decline in religious literacy and liturgical practice. In the third part, I try to differentiate the aims of communities in academic and in religious environments in order to describe a contrast that cannot be grasped by the unqualified duality of faith and knowledge or by its popular supplements and derivatives.

Truth-Seeking Communities

Truth-seeking communities are not to be confused with groups that announce more or less loudly that they have found the truth and now possess it.[1] Truth-seeking communities are groups of human beings who indeed raise claims to truth but who, above all, develop and practice open and public forms and procedures in which these claims to truth are subjected to critical and self-critical examination. Both the academy and many religious communities—at least in the Jewish and Christian traditions—regard themselves as such truth-seeking communities. Truth-seeking communities advance processes in which certainty and consensus can be developed, closely examined, and heightened. In doing so, however, they are to guard against reducing truth to certainty and consensus. However, truth-seeking communities also advance processes in which complex states of affairs can be made accessible in repeatable and predictable ways. In doing so, they are to guard against reducing truth to the repeatable, predictable, and correct investigation of the subject under consideration.

In my view, the path of the search for truth is adequately characterized only by the reciprocal relation between, on the one hand, the investigation and heightening of certainty and consensus and, on the other hand, the repeatable, predictable, and correct investigation of the subject under consideration. This path can be traveled only in open and public critical and self-critical communication.

People ought not to make light of the accomplishment, the value, and the blessing of truth-seeking communities, even though it is necessary to take self-critically into account the fact that these communities are always guided by other interests as well, including the search for maximum cultural resonance and for moral and political influence. They are also guided by vanity and the desire for power and control. The sober recognition that pure and perfect truth-seeking communities are rare can help balance appreciation and self-critique. It helps one be very careful about the blind self-privileging of academic work or religious communication.[2] Beware of attaching inferior value to justice-seeking communities or to communities that are committed to physical and psychic therapy and the restoration of health. There is also the obligation to respect communities that seek political loyalty and a corresponding exercise of influence, communities that seek economic and monetary success, and communities that seek to maximize public attention and resonance. It is characteristic of pluralistic societies that truth-seeking communities do not claim their truths to be absolute but rather recognize and delineate their important and indispensable contributions to the entire society and enable their contributions to be perceived in other contexts as well.

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[1] That these mentalities can have roots in religious and scientific traditions is demonstrated by the contributions by M. Stenmark and A. Fyfe in this volume.

[2] In this volume see also E. Barker's reflections on tensions between "new religious movements" and religious institutions with long traditions.

If it is true that European modernity has equally shaped faith and knowledge in truth-seeking communities—how can religious and academic orientation be differentiated? How can each be demarcated? The success and the problem of the most dominant modern form of faith can be grasped through analysis of its inner texture, which seems to allow faith to participate in knowledge and still draw a line between faith and knowledge. In this form of modern faith, knowledge becomes self-referential and turns into an inner certainty. I call this religious, or rather quasi-religious, form "subjectivist faith."

The Structure of Subjectivist Faith and Its Religiously Destructive Power

A general understanding of faith in current Western societies is that a believing individual is utterly certain of something "wholly Other," of a "transcendent" power or authority or vaguely conceived transcendent person who at the same time, however, is intimately close (see Welker, 2004). The "beyond," the "final point of reference of creaturely dependence," the "other side" of the "founding relation of our existence" is given in an utmost, though continuously challenged, certainty. This gained, challenged, and regained certainty is called faith. This conception of faith approximates and even coincides with emphatic self-reference. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968) rightly called it "indirect Cartesianism" (Barth, 1964, pp. 223–224). This indirect Cartesianism can be grasped by the formulae, "I feel somehow dependent, thus I am" and "I feel somehow dependent, thus I believe."

Because this conception of faith approximates and even coincides with emphatic self-reference, religious communication and particularly Christian theology have tried hard to differentiate this faith from all forms of self-reference. The more the inner certainty named faith has been treasured, the more all other forms of self-reference have been stigmatized and even denounced as "sin." Against this background, attempts to distinguish between innocent, trivial, and healthy forms of self-reference on the one side, and between distortive, traumatic and even demonic forms of self-reference on the other have seemed risky. A paradoxical and neuroticizing mentality has accompanied this religious form, for it has proven extremely difficult to distinguish this empty inner certainty of a wholly Other from a very simple and basic form of "pure" human self-reference that has come to terms with its inner structure, namely, that all self-reference has to include some element of difference if it wants to reach the level of experiencing "certainty."

The upside of this form of challenged and reaffirmed certainty, which can be understood both religiously and secularly, has seemed to be that nobody can escape this type of faith—at least not in cultures and among mentalities for which the self-reference of the individual is central (i.e., those belonging to typically modern world society). Because this form can appear both as a religious form and as a form of pure dialectical self-reference, it can be interpreted in a variety of ways.

This form of certainty could be used to make complex religious, moral, and metaphysical positions accessible to common sense by reducing and trivializing them and stating that in the end none of them offer anything but this dialectic of subjective immediacy and difference. For instance, it could be used:

1. Religiously as what Schleiermacher (1768–1834) called the "feeling of the utmost dependence" (*Gefühl der schlechthinnigen Abhängigkeit*; see Schleiermacher, 1821–1822/1999)
2. Philosophically as the simultaneity of self-assurance and self-challenge in the encounter with the "You ought!" of the moral law (Kant, 1788/2002)
3. Metaphysically as the dialectical unity and tension of "essence and existence" (Tillich, 1951–1963)[3]

This experience of immediacy and negation, this experience of a religious or quasi-religious certainty called faith, seems to be extremely precious and powerful. For it seems to allow religious communication to be introduced at practically any point. Nobody can escape this experience of immediacy and negation. A person trying to focus on his or her "inner self" immediately runs into this quasi-religious certainty. What is the element of the Other, whom I encounter when I try to reach the utmost depth of my inner self? Is that God? In a form that appeals to the modern mind, there seems to exist what Calvin (1559/1997), in the opening pages, called "natural awareness" and the "presentiment of the Divine."[4] To be sure, it is a culturally tamed and domesticated natural certainty. Where Calvin saw a vague awe in the face of aesthetic powers, cosmic laws, and social orders, the modern religious specimen has only a notion of the poor dialectic of empty self-awareness.

Many forms of theology, teaching, and proclamation in the classical mainstream churches have treasured this kind of abstract and empty faith very highly. They have gone to great lengths to shield this empty certainty from the discovery of its religious arbitrariness and ambiguity. They have adopted the idealist assertion that this certainty is the "foundation" of self-consciousness and the key to all epistemological and moral value and the true foundation of personality (see Welker, 2000). They have clothed this poor form with all sorts of rhetoric of "wholeness." And they have tried to reinforce the differentiation between a self-reference given by the Divine and a self-reference of purely anthropological origin. However, on the basis of the underlying theoretical construction, it has been impossible to take these attempts at differentiation and rid them of a trait of the arbitrary. As the long debates on the reflection theory of self-consciousness show, this basic dialectical relation admits of only the arbitrary definition of the "subjective and active" and the

[3] It was above all Sören Kierkegaard (1954) who repeatedly presented this form of certainty as faith and recommended it as a genuinely Christian attitude: "exactly this is … the formula for faith: by relating to itself and by wanting to be itself, the self founds itself transparently in the power which set it" (p. 47) or "Faith is: that the self, by being itself and wanting to be itself, transparantly founds itself in God" (p. 81).

[4] See also Welker (1999, pp. 21–32) and the important differentiation between a natural awareness and a presentiment of the Divine and a "natural theology" by Pannenberg (1988).

"passive and objective" side. In reality, however, both aspects coemerge in this self-referential certainty (see Henrich, 1967, 1982; Welker, 1975).

This critical analysis of the inner texture of a typically modern form of religiosity should not lead one to underestimate its power. For this form of faith makes possible the comfortable fusion of religious and secular mentalities, of faith and knowledge. It allows one, for instance, to proceed in no time from religious to moral communication and vice versa. Above all, it is an excellent latent focus for a consumerist culture with its effort to trigger the greed-fulfillment mechanism as effectively and perfectly as possible: "already—but not yet"; "not yet—but already"; intimacy with myself, which, however, changes into the encounter with the Other; the utmost certainty and yet also the dialectical difference. Furthermore, this type of faith generously creates a religious coding of universalist mentalities. And it recursively seems to bless religious mentalities with a universalist aura. It continuously signals the message: "In a latent way, no reasonable person can be anything but religious!" If this religious form and its catalytic potential is taken seriously, it must also be made clear that it systematically prevents and discourages a content-laden and communicative piety, that it has actually driven vast parts of the Western churches into a religious speechlessness and inability to communicate.

Thus a complex religious syndrome of suffering goes along with subjectivist faith. This syndrome of suffering demands a thorough self-examination and self-criticism of modern theology and piety. Paralyzed and traumatized, the classical main-line churches in the Western industrial and information societies are obviously suffering at the beginning of the 21st century from a complex set of factors. It is that perception, not traditionalist preferences, that necessitates the examination and correction of a powerful basic form of modern religiosity.

At least five mutually reinforcing factors make subjectivist faith a power that not only blocks faith but seems to destroy it systematically. First, subjectivist faith comes in the form of a transcendental principle. It does not come—as faith should—in a form that directly animates or enlivens the communication of faith. It is individuizing and stale, a fact hidden by its universally arbitrary availability. Second, subjectivist faith comes as a necessarily empty religious form. It does not come—as faith should—in a disclosing form that gains and promotes the knowledge of God and, in its light, stimulates content-laden knowledge of self and world. Third, subjectivist faith comes as an unconditional and utmost certainty. It is a self-sufficient religious form. Although this faith can and must be activated again and again, it does not—as faith should—offer a an ordered process for passing or advancing from mere certainty to the serious individual and communal search for truth. Fourth, subjectivist faith comes as a paradoxical, self-inhibiting, even neuroticizing form in its combination of immediacy and negation. It does not promote—as faith should—the joy, doxology, and ennoblement of those who are seized by faith and who spread it. Fifth, subjectivist faith is of an escapist character. It conditions the withdrawal from expressive, festive, communicative, progressive forms of religious life and even counteracts them—as faith need not and should not.

The reason for the successful evolution of subjectivist faith must be imputed to the fact that, to many people, it has seemed to offer a simply optimal or, at least in the history of culture, a superior religiosity. Subjectivist faith is highly sensitive to and open for the concrete individual, for that person's emotional and affective forms of experience. More precisely, in principle almost completely unburdened by substantive religious matters, it is mainly concerned with the individual in his or her relation of dependence. Subjectivist faith covers the substantive side in principle through an abstract theism and totalitarian religious thought that relates everything—in fact, in a seemingly thoughtless manner—to God and God to everything.[5]

Subjectivist faith thus generates more problems than it seems to solve. In abstract theism, the question of theodicy becomes unsolvable. If God is declared to be omnipotent, how is God's goodness and love compatible with cancer, tsunamis, and concentration camps? If one is simply thrown back to empty certainty in the midst of an experience of dependence, how can this inner void be filled in a meaningful way?

Truth- and Salvation-Seeking Communities

In order to understand the self-secularizing modern type of faith, it is crucial to see that it evolved in the attempt to fuse faith and knowledge and to overcome the demarcation problem. An educated faith, a faith that seeks understanding, was embraced and cultivated or at least constructively tolerated by the university and in public religious education. Furthermore, the demarcation arrived at by subjectivist faith must be identified as a problem, as a poor solution. Self-referential religious certainty either proves to be a mere by-product of secular processes of investigation or becomes divorced from truth-seeking communities and degenerates into a mere empty certainty that can be generated again and again. The philosopher G. W. F. Hegel would have called such certainty "bad infinity" (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*).

The poverty of subjectivist faith becomes clear when one sees that it cannot incorporate two elements of faith that the search for knowledge and truth alone

[5] A whole theological network of critical encounters and movements of the 20th century collaborated in the collapse of this religious form of power. This was a deliberate goal of German theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jürgen Moltmann and has remained so in many theologies of liberation and almost all feminist theologies. At least initial steps in this direction were made by Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Eberhard Jüngel, and David Tracy, in some process theologies, and by other thinkers and developments. Christological and trinitarian insights and questions were decisive in the efforts to end classical theism (not to be confused with the monotheism of the living God). In addition, insights from the theology of law and from pneumatology, as well as metaphysical, moral, and political arguments forced abstract theism to be called into question. Despite all its difficulties (see Welker, 1999, pp. 1–5), this development has to be supplemented and complemented by an equally serious critique of subjectivist faith.

cannot offer. Faith—at least in the Jewish and Christian traditions—is not only directed to the Creator who sustains his creation. The search for an intensified and deepened knowledge of creation is not sufficient in order to understand the driving energies of faith. Faith goes hand in hand with a deep sense of the endangerment and the self-endangerment of creation and with an awareness that Divine creativity has to supplement the sustaining powers through powers of salvation and redemption. Legal, political, and moral dimensions and their limits in the face of the self-endangerment of human cultures and societies become apparent. Both the Old and the New Testament traditions generated fresh religious insights in the presence of foreign world powers and the inability of the given political and religious traditions to stand up to them. The search for deeper dimensions of the saving and redeeming God guided religious sensitivities.

Yet even the complementarity of Divine sustenance and Divine saving does not explain the full dimensions of faith's orientation as opposed to academic and educational quests for truth. Confronted with the ultimate futility of individual and communal life, including even history and the life of the whole cosmos, faith directs itself toward the Divine elevation and ennoblement of creaturely life. God's rescuing and saving powers at the level of mere natural and historical repair and restitution are not enough. Eschatological questions and hope for the New Creation, the transformation of natural bodies, and a life in realms to which religion, mathematics, and great music possibly bear witness dimly emerge. At that point the clarity and academic controllability of the search for truth becomes questioned. Yet faith cannot abandon these perspectives related to the human search for salvation. It has to search for soteriological and eschatological knowledge.

Subjectivist faith is far from posing these deep questions and challenges. Like Baron von Muenchhausen, who tried to save himself from being swallowed up by the fen by dragging himself out by his own hair, subjectivist faith replaces religious ennoblement by self-referential certainty and a very simple notion of freedom correlated with it. The challenge to investigate demarcations and clashes between faith and knowledge can open one's eyes to the inner logics of current religious decay and to alternatives and opportunities in a complicated cultural setting.

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