

THE SHORTEST DEFINITION OF RELIGION:

INTERRUPTION¹

An Proposal for Doing Theology in Contemporary Europe

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The transmission of the Christian tradition has lost its self-evidence in Europe. Culturally speaking, tradition has been interrupted; it is no longer unproblematically handed down from generation to generation. In my own region, the Roman-Catholic Flanders of former days is no more; Christians, and certainly those committed to the Church, form a minority in a society that is increasingly reaching de-traditionalisation. In this contribution I wish to defend the position that the ‘cultural interruption’ of the Christian tradition should not make Christians look back longingly to that lost ‘Christian age’. On the contrary, as with every historical context so too does our ‘postmodern’ context offer Christians the chance to reconsider and reformulate the identity, credibility and relevance of their faith. I shall argue that the dialogue with this context can make clear that, theologically speaking, the category of ‘interruption’ also stands at the very heart of Christian faith.

I will present this in five paragraphs. (1) I will first look to the situation of the Christian faith and its community in terms of contemporary culture. This first perspective serves, as it were, as an external perspective, the observer’s point of view. (2) Thereupon I sketch the great challenge our ‘postmodern’ culture presents to Christian faith and indicate how Christians can respond to this by means of their tradition. I will here particularly bring into the

¹ Taken from: J.B. Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, Mainz, 1977, p. 150, thesis vi; also mentioned in: *Unterbrechungen. Theologisch-politische Perspektiven und Profile*, Gütersloh, 1981, p. 86.

² This text is the slightly modified version of *The Shortest Definition of Religion: Interruption*, in *Communio viatorum* 46 (2004) 299-322. An elaboration of the same theme has been undertaken in: L. Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, New York: Continuum, 2007.

picture the increased awareness in our culture for diversity and otherness. After a connecting paragraph (3) I subsequently try to justify this answer theologically. (4) This results in an internal perspective: how can I, as participant in the Christian tradition, transmit it in a both critical and constructive way? So doing we attempt to arrive at a Christian identity apt to deal with the challenges of today's contextual critical consciousness.

We thus commence with the many questions that Christians and non-Christians ask themselves on what it means to be a Christian and to belong, at least in Flanders, to the Roman-Catholic Church today.

1. The cultural interruption of Christian identity – an outer perspective

Flemish society is today undergoing a process of *accelerated secularisation*, perhaps better termed *detraditionalisation*. God belongs less and less to everyday life. Politics, commerce, law, education, medicine: each have their own institutions and specialists, their own logic and language, their own roles and relevance in society. The religious or Christian contribution to all this is of increasingly less significance – whether or not this is in fact desirable. Crucifixes are disappearing from the courthouse. The feast day of the king must now (also) be accompanied by a civil ceremony. The linking of church to civil marriage is currently under discussion as is the state-funded salary of clergy.

In addition to this, the traditional Christian pillar (a ideologically inspired complex of organisations and institutions dealing with education, care, health, youth, labour, leisure time, culture,...) is having difficulties with its Christian past and identity. Some of its organisations have dropped the 'C' or 'K' ('Christelijk' or 'Katholiek') from their names; for example NCMV, the Christian organisation for small enterprises has become UNIZO, an acronym without a reference to its Christian origin. Still further, organisations and institutions from the broad Christian framework are likely to follow suit. That such a thing is possible, and hardly keeps anyone from

losing sleep over it, is due to the internal secularisation – de-christianisation – of these organisations, as much of their members as of their structures. People are no longer Christians because they belong to these organisations. Quite the reverse, these organisations are having problems with their identity precisely because they are no longer comprised of Christians alone.³ A telling example: 75% of all Flemish pupils are enrolled for secondary education in Catholic schools, although less than 5% of them are still actively involved in daily Church life

Indeed, the statistics demonstrate as much: these Christian organisations can generally count a major portion of the population among their members, while socially speaking the Christian faithful are slowly forming a minority. When people are asked to define themselves, 47.4% of Belgians consider themselves Catholic, 1.2% count themselves Protestant and 15.3% call themselves Christians but neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic.⁴ It is because of this that tending to pastoral needs in these organisations is no easy task. Not only are there scarcely any more pastoral leaders, but also few members still wait upon ‘the priest’s word’ or upon the obligatory Eucharistic celebration commencing the new work year.

But the most telling figures come naturally from the sharp falling away from attending Eucharistic celebration.: In 1967, 52% of Flemish people went to church weekly (42.9% for Belgium), in 1998 this figure was only 12.7% (Belgium 11.2%).⁵ When we only consider the younger generation, this number drops to 4%.⁶ We also witness a steady decrease in the number of baptisms and church weddings, two rites of passage that always used to do well. In 1967, 96.1% of children in Flanders were baptised, in 1998: 73%. The numbers for overall Belgium are more than 8% lower than this for 1998 (64.7%). The figures for the section of the population that still marries in the

³ In connection with this, see for instance my reflection on the identity of a ‘Catholic’ university in a detraditionalised Flanders: *‘Katholieke’ universiteit: vier denkpistes*, in *Ethische Perspectieven* 10 (2001) 4, 250-258. An English version of this article will appear in *Louvain Studies*.

⁴ See Karel Dobbelaere and Liliane Voyé, *Religie en kerkbetrokkenheid: ambivalentie en vervreemding*, in K. Dobbelaere et. al., *Verloren zekerheid. De Belgen en hun waarden, overtuigingen en houdingen*, Tiel: Lannoo, 2000, 117-152, p. 119.

⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 122-123. This is approximately one fifth of those who describe themselves as Catholic.

⁶ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 135.

Church: for Flanders 91.8% in 1967, 51.2% in 1998; for Belgium, 86.1% in 1967, 49.2% in 1998.⁷ Incidentally, not all who partake of the rituals are actually Church members.⁸ A number of non-Church members also participate in baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial because there are yet few alternatives outside the Church to celebrate the important moments of passage in life, or because they want to please their parents and/or grandparents. The Catholic rituals then serve to celebrate a non-Church type, undefined religiosity. “One considers them as a publicly available remedy which can be administered without any preceding special conditions. Their specific confessional nature is in this way neutralised.”⁹ Another significant fact is Church involvement. Of the Belgians born after 1970 only 9% is more or less engaged in the Church community (2.1% key members and 6.9% medium). Of peers their age, 35.7% can be described as borderline Church-affiliated, and 29.2% of the first generation while 26.1% of the second is non Church-affiliated.¹⁰ Research shows, moreover, that “extremely few people who have become non Church-affiliated from home later [become] Church-affiliated, as opposed to many who grew up Church-affiliated at home becoming borderline and even non Church-affiliated.”¹¹

⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 123.

⁸ A survey in the second year of the Master’s Degrees in Sciences (Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geology, Geography, and Informatics) at the K.U.Leuven delivered roughly similar figures for the academic years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 on the two following questions. To the question, “would you still marry, baptise and be buried in the Church, and why (not)?” roughly 70% answered affirmatively, and to the following question, “should the Church not be stricter in its policy and only allow people who really exercise their faith to partake of the sacraments and rituals?” only 30 to 40% answered positively, thus 60 to 70% responded negatively. When we compare the results to both questions with each other, we notice that a substantial portion of those who answered ‘yes’ to the first question, i.e. roughly 50%, are not prepared to make any commitment towards their Christian faith.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 131.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 128. Dobbelaere and Voyé wonder if this shift might not be more attributable to the increasing irreligiosity than to dissatisfaction with the institutional Church. Leaving the Church certainly has something to do with the latter. At the same time, however, the researchers state that “‘non-Church’ religiosity has difficulty surviving from one non-churchgoing generation to the next: the latter generations of non-churchgoers are increasingly less religious than the first.” They then also conclude: “In other words, religiosity has to be supported by plausibility structures and in Belgium there is but one such structure that is clearly visible. If one comes into conflict with the Catholic Church, falling away from the Church becomes the only alternative. [...] In the long run, however, and certainly after a few generations, it will clearly give rise to irreligiosity.” (p. 129-130).

At the same time our society has become internally *pluralized*. There is the perception that there are many forms for giving meaning to one's life and coexistence, and there does not appear to be any that can legitimately claim primacy over the rest and so become the measuring standard for them all. For instance, specifically we have become – socially speaking and thus independent of one's own individual choices in the matter – confronted with many forms of partner relationships, parenting and education, leisure activities, career enhancement, value preferences and fundamental life options. Concerning this last item there are not only – proportionally speaking – less Christians than before, but more importantly there is a *diversity of fundamental life options* going on around us. Besides Christians (divided into different denominations), there are atheists, agnostics, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, ex-Christians (or post-Christians¹²), the indifferent, individualists, people belonging to neo-religious movements (such as New Age), etc. This diversity is becoming increasingly visible and poses new and different challenges for Christian believers, over and above those of the 'de-christianisation' of society.

Both secularisation and pluralisation question in their own way the identity of Christians today. What does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to belong to the Church? Furthermore, how is this identity to be preserved?

Should Christians *adapt themselves to the current culture* because non-Christians can no longer understand them? Do they have to search for a new language that still addresses people, above all the young? Does this run the risk that too much accommodation will cost Christianity its specificity? A good example of such accommodation is the discussion on whether Jesus can still hold a specific place in relation to Moses, Muhammad and Buddha. Are they not all of the same order? The price of such equation is the loss of the key element in Christian faith, namely that in Jesus Christ God is revealed in a way unparalleled to any other in history.

¹² Having an already deeply secularised Christian affiliation, post-Christians retain at best only a very fragmentary commitment to faith and faith community, which expresses itself in merely occasional (and diminishing) attendance at rites of passage and a sparse and unintegrated knowledge of the Christian tradition – despite years of religious education and (possibly even) catechesis.

In the search for a self-identity Christians can also choose another option and *set themselves against the current culture* for its being Christian no longer. Christian identity is then tied to the resolute and uncompromising adherence to (the letter of) one's own tradition and (exclusivity of) faith community. Other religious traditions also react in such a frequently traditionalist or fundamentalist manner over against (post-)modern culture from which they expect nothing good.¹³ The terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 in which the two World Trade Center towers were completely destroyed were an extreme outgrowth of this. In any event, here too we can ask ourselves if Christian identity has not finally been lost: after all, faith has always involved culture and society. Tradition is not something that is passed down unchanged through the centuries. Time and again church leaders, theologians and the faithful have, with varying success, responded to the signs of the times and shaped the life and teaching of their faith from the dialogue between culture and Christian faith.

Expressed more technically, the Christian faith only survives by means of *recontextualisation*. Its credibility is, after all, necessarily a contextual credibility as well. In principle, each development in the tradition of the Christian faith lies inextricably embedded in a specific historical context that intrinsically contributed to that development. The Christian faith does not exist disconnected from the context or culture in which Christians live but is in fact caught up in it. *Ergo*: if the context or culture changes then the Christian faith is challenged to shift accordingly. Recontextualisation, then, is also a continuing, never-ending task. After all, Christians take part, as do their contemporaries, in the prevailing context participating equally in its sensitivities, attitudes, views and ambiguities. This is where theology is embedded, charged with pondering the internal intelligibility and the external credibility of the Christian faith.

It is especially on the *individual level* that Christians also encounter dechristianisation and religious diversity. For the most part it still concerns confrontations with ex-Christians. We need only think of the grandparents

¹³ It is mostly the emancipatory tendencies of modernity and not its scientific or technological advances that are rejected. What is more, many so-called traditionalist and fundamentalist groups are extremely active in the latter field and make full use of modern techniques, among others the media and the financial world.

complaining that the younger generations have become estranged from the Church, or contacts with colleagues at work or with parents in the school yard. Because leaving the Church often occurs quietly it sometimes takes a while before it is noticed, but that does not make it any less real. At the same time, Christians have contact with people of other faiths, more so than previously, not only through the media but also in daily reality, in the classrooms of the children, on the street, and at work. This is especially noticeable for instance when encountering Muslims during the period of Ramadan or the ceremonial offering.

All these encounters repeatedly confront Christians today – and certainly the young among them – with the question of *why remain Christian?* It is almost abnormal, or at least certainly exceptional, to continue being one. This also presents problems when raising children, in terms of what faith practices to keep as well as the transmission of the faith narratives. Can teenagers for example just simply inform without risk their friends and coaches that they cannot join in next Saturday's soccer match because they will be altar servers at the Saturday afternoon mass? Is it obvious any more that one's daughter's friend is coming along to Church? Is it not naïve for a parent to live out and present children with examples of selfless engagement and forgiveness, as part of the praxis of following Jesus Christ? How can Christians explain the belief in the resurrection to children and adults in a context where culturally speaking very few points of contact remain?¹⁴ And above all, what does it mean for a Christian to believe in God at a time when many speak of a 'God eclipse'?

This outer perspective teaches us that the Christian tradition and the identity of Christians, has been *culturally interrupted*. The Christian faith no longer passes unrestricted and unquestioned. For two generations now Christians have no longer been succeeding in carrying through the Christian tradition.

This naturally brings much tragedy and incomprehension in its wake. Many priests for instance – who are themselves dwindling in drastic numbers – witness with heavy hearts their churches becoming emptier by the year and

¹⁴ Research shows moreover that not a few of those who call themselves Christian choose rather reincarnation than resurrection in speaking about life after death.

their parishes dying; no longer are there sufficient numbers of young families to take the place of older generations. This, for example, is extremely conspicuous in the weeks following a holy communion: only a fraction of the children who on that occasion had for the first time received communion continue to partake at the weekend services. The current situation meets with much incomprehension, for instance over the failure of the Catholic education project as with religious education (whether it be in Catholic or state schools). Schools no longer instruct well-initiated Catholic intellectuals or artisans. In their classrooms religious educators meet only a few young people with just a passing familiarity with – leave aside initiation into – the Christian narrative. It is because of this that both Catholic education and religious education are undergoing a thorough reassessment of their own function in the current context.¹⁵

But the deep tragedy and incomprehension aside, perhaps this situation also provides opportunities to the Christian faith and its community. Here there should however be no misunderstanding. Christians should not just strive to form merely a minority in our Flemish society, as though wishing to be a sort of ‘holy remnant’ keeping the torch of faith burning in dark times. The suggestion that a minority Church will automatically become a better Church because it will then no longer be enmeshed with society and culture is not at all self-evident and is in fact even counter-productive. There is no guarantee that a smaller faith community would be a more Christian one. The chance of ghettoisation would only become greater as a result of this. Moreover, nothing guarantees the survival of the Christian faith in Europe any longer. When the last Christian passes – or falls – away, Christian faith and its communities will be well and truly over in Europe.

The situation is such, however, that a virtue can be made of necessity and the new situation be investigated as to *possibilities* for deepening Christian faith and its community in order to renew it and this way prepare for the

¹⁵ This reassessment in religious education resulted in new curricula being developed from 1998-2000. For an account of the new profile of religious education and its theological-epistemological presuppositions, I refer to my assessment on the matter in: *Beyond Correlation Strategies. Teaching Religion in a De-traditionalised and Pluralised Context: A Playground for Socio-cultural and Theological Renewal*, in D. Pollefeyt & H. Lombaerts (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Religious Education* (BETL) Leuven: Peeters Press, 2004, 233-254.

future – without, as said, the guarantee of survival. Each altered and new context issues a challenge towards recontextualisation. And, as said earlier, it is the task of theology to illuminate and map out on a reflexive level such a recontextualisation process.

2. Diversity, identity and the interruption of the encounter with the other

All the great ideologies, which for several years seemed to shape the social debate, today appear to share the same fate as the Christian narrative and equally have problems in transmitting that for which they stand. In a so-called postmodern frame of thought one refers to this as *the end of the 'grand narratives'*.

These 'grand narratives' stand for the attempts on the part of the human being –since the Enlightenment – to bring nature and society under its complete control and shape it according to its wishes. According to Jean-François Lyotard we can differentiate two sorts of narratives. On the one hand there are the grand narratives of knowledge which seek through reason and technology to understand, rule and adapt the world to human needs. On the other we have the grand narratives of emancipation that are especially intent on the reform of society – examples of this are liberalism, socialism, communism, etc.¹⁶ Ideas basic to both are always: (1) an enormous confidence in human potentiality (especially human reason), coupled with a huge awareness of responsibility, and (2) a belief that reality – nature and society – is malleable, thus with human intervention it can be made to fit human needs.

The belief in progress resulting from all this nonetheless received a severe blow in the last century, especially the decades towards the end. The grand narratives not only could not carry out their promises, they very often lapsed into their antitheses. As a result, they had to contend with an irreversible

¹⁶ Cf. J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Paris: Vrin, 1979. 'Narrative' here refers to a religious, philosophical or ideological complex or system, to the way in which people and communities perceive and ascribe meaning to themselves, society and the world.

loss of confidence. The most telling examples of this are Marxism's failed social project and the disastrous ecological consequences of the unrestrained will to rule the world through science and technology. In both cases the urge to control conjured up, as it were, the uncontrollable. The absolute, all-embracing, self-satisfied hunger for power that uttered itself in the grand narratives has proven to be both counter-productive and the cause of many victims. The credibility of their pretensions and promises is shattered. This is the paradox of our postmodern time: precisely in a context exploding with knowledge and capability its boundaries have become all but too evident.

Postmodern thinkers have pointed out that the grand narratives did not pay attention to these boundaries, to the uncontrollable that escapes all attempts at controlling it. Said differently and more technically, they point out to us – and this is the key to postmodern critical consciousness – that *the 'other' always and again forms the boundary to the 'one'*. Furthermore, only the 'one' that reckons with the 'other' at its boundary, who knows how to relate to it one way or another, who allows itself to be challenged by it – only that one can escape the pitfall of the grand narratives. After all, these narratives proved themselves especially to be 'closed' narratives, without openness or sensitivity for the other.

All grand narratives developed strategies so as not to reckon with the other either by including it on the one hand (reducing it to 'more of the same') or excluding it on the other. For Marxism as grand narrative the other was included as proletarian and thus revolutionary, or immediately excluded as bourgeois and thus counter-revolutionary. The 'other', the 'others' have become victims of the dictatorship of the proletariat, with the 'gulag archipelago' of Stalinism as its outgrowth. Another example is the positivism that science has made an absolute norm of: the 'other' is then only legitimate if it obeys scientific laws or – to the extent that – it can become the object of scientific research. In all other cases it is by definition irrational, untrustworthy, nonsense, out of date, superstition.

In the postmodern condition we have thus learnt that we are no masters of reality, or of our society, not even of our own identity. Our narratives are time and again confronted with an other-than-ourselves. They are in fact nothing more than specific attempts at dealing with life, coexistence and

reality and can never be absolutised into becoming *the* narrative. They are historically grown, contextually embedded, the fruit too of many coincidences. It is because of this that we have today become more sensitive towards the *diversity* of narratives. I already referred in my first paragraph to the increased awareness of the diversity of fundamental life options, and the confrontation that this carries with it for the identity of Christians – but equally for every other identity.

I now wish to put forward my reflection. It is precisely in diversity itself that today the other, other to oneself and thus its boundary, is to be seen. Because there are also other forms of parenting and education for instance, one's own choices – one's narrative, the way in which one makes sense of one's choices and life – are both placed into perspective and questioned: one's own narrative could also in principle have been different – and there is no one to pass an ultimate judgment on this. This awareness of diversity and otherness is at the same time also linked to a sharpened appreciation for *that which is specific to oneself* – with other words: the particularity of one's own narrative. We are what we are precisely because of this specificity that distinguishes us from other narratives. Put this way, the recognition of diversity and the insurmountable character thereof does not necessarily lead to *relativism*. We are all players on the field of fundamental life options; no single position can elevate itself beyond this jostling with diversity as if it were not immediately already involved in it. We can, after all, never make an abstraction from our own position, in that, it always remains different to that of the other's, because it remains our own. We cannot at the same time take in the other positions (a mix of positions would mean it is a new position). Relativism is merely one option among others and not an overarching perspective.

What then are the consequences for the identity of Christians? To summarise, the flip side of the loss in credibility of the 'grand narratives' is a renewed and heightened *sensitivity for diversity and otherness*. Our culture has apparently learned that according a basic respect for whoever holds a diverging opinion need not be in conflict with one's own views. This is, for example, the reason why Roman Catholics would no longer call Protestants and adherents of other religions simply heretics or heathens. This sensitivity has not been easily achieved in our society – the agitation surrounding

asylum seekers and the rise of the extreme right demonstrates as much. Yet, all the same, what is different no longer immediately provokes a purely defensive reaction, but can now also challenge, even fascinate.

This sensitivity for diversity and otherness has also the inverse effect that Christians are *conscious* more strongly than before *of their own position* as Christians. They not only see now more clearly that other religions and fundamental life options can also contain worthy and authentic ways of living; they have, moreover, learned that their way of life is but one among many others. They are equal players on the field of many religions and fundamental life options with their own narratives, customs, traditions and communities. Following after Jesus Christ is their specific way of giving meaning to and organising their life. They also know that had they been born elsewhere, they may very well have belonged to another religion.

This does not mean that religions are simply exchangeable with one another, as though it no longer matters if one is a Christian, Buddhist or atheist. The difference between the Christian faith and Buddhism or atheism is precisely that the Christian faith is the faith of Christians, and that this will always be their point of departure in viewing reality, in this case, the diversity of religions. One's own position cannot simply be placed within brackets. As with members of other fundamental life options, Christians too cannot retreat to a non-involved observer position. All are already participants; Christians know themselves because of their own fundamental life option that has been placed amidst the diversity thereof and it is because they are already Christians that the other religions and fundamental life options appear to them as different/other.

Just as people who ascribe to different fundamental life options and religions may have certain matters in common, it is often what they have in common with other fundamental life options that precisely constitutes the difference between them: Christian fasting is not simply a variant of Ramadan; the Buddhist mystical contemplation of nothingness is not the same as the Christian mysticism of love. The Old Testament to Christians is not the Bible of the Jews even though they share that tradition. The encounter with other religions and fundamental life options thus teaches

Christians something *about themselves* first, about their position on the religious playing field, about how to stand in the world and view it.¹⁷

Otherness, however, also carries with it questioning, *confrontation*, sometimes even conflict, and it invites Christians to create an openness within their engagement with the Christian faith. They will thus increasingly have to learn to both hold on to the value and truth of their own faith position as well as make room for a necessary openness that allows for the encounter with the other.

In short, this is the opportunity that our current culture of diversity in fundamental life options offers to the Christian faith after secularisation. Even though the Christian tradition and identity have been interrupted, there is no reason to simply give in to cultural pessimism. In a time where belief is no longer evident and an explicit choice is demanded from the believer, Christians after all become more conscious of their *own specific identity*. As a faith community they stand in the footsteps of Jesus whom they confess as the Christ. Moreover, they stand charged with viewing their own way of life from the perspective of a diversity and otherness in fundamental life options. They have a double task: (a) to take their own narrative seriously (no relativism) *and* (b) to respect other religious positions (no fundamentalism). For the *encounter with diversity and otherness interrupts our own faith narrative* continuously, certainly when it has the tendency to close itself off and in this way make victims – the very first victim being the God in whom they profess to believe. On this last point ‘interruption’ becomes a theological category.

3. Crossing over

The dialogue with the current culture of diversity thus contains its opportunities. This seems to be the lesson too from *practical experience*, as

¹⁷ Another example: precisely what binds the three so-called prophetic religions (also called the religions of the book or religions of revelation), at the same time fundamentally distinguishes them (a) in the way that they perceive their ‘prophet’, Muhammad, Jesus or Moses respectively, (b) the role that their holy scriptures have within the religion (Koran, Bible or Torah), and (c) the way in which the revelation of God in history is understood.

a radio interview on 14 January 1999 for the Radio 1 morning show, *Voor de dag*, demonstrates. “A woman tells of an encounter the evening before. She is involved with *Kerkwerk multicultureel samenleven* (Church work on behalf of multicultural living) and was invited by a Moroccan community in Molenbeek to celebrate the ‘breaking of the fast’ with them. This community had the practice of always holding an open house every evening of Ramadan at sundown. The woman recounted that the conversation at table soon took on a profound sense of meaningfulness, certainly when religious themes such as the importance of ‘fasting’ and the relations between Muslims and Christians were being discussed. It struck this woman then that in these conversations, for example on fasting, it was precisely in the similarities between Islam and Christianity that the differences could be noticed at the same time. The outcome of this event was certainly not a relativising ‘it actually all boils down to the same thing in the end,’ but instead a respectful recognition of difference and self-worth. What is more, this woman then went on to describe how the Christians began to question themselves about the seriousness of their own faith: did they, for example, experience their own fasting authentically enough? Definitely an unexpected wake-up call, she concluded.¹⁸ Respect for the irreducible identity of one’s own Christian narrative and for the otherness of the different religions and fundamental life options can thus go together – what is more, the encounter made this woman consider her own identity and its importance precisely through its relation to another religion.

But can the Christian narrative enter into these opportunities? Can it allow itself to be interrupted by otherness, specifically other religions, fundamental life options, people and communities? *Can* it be an *open narrative*, a narrative that has learned to remain open for that which is other and thereby be challenged by it? Is not Jesus proclaimed as ‘the way, the truth and the life’? Are not Christians ultimately convinced of their truth claim because of their being called by God? Should they not be chiefly concerned with setting right those who think differently from them? Yet, if

¹⁸ Taken from *Interrupting Tradition. An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs, 30), Leuven: Peeters / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003, p.97-98.

they have the truth, does this mean that others cannot have the truth? But, if everyone has the truth, is this not as good as saying that no truth exists?

4. God interrupts our narratives – an inner perspective

Returning to the experience of the woman from the radio interview, it was an experience of a fruitful and productive interruption of her own Christian narrative by the narrative of an other. For Christians the path opens itself here to appreciate anew their own belief in a God who is both revealed in history and takes on the lot of history. As a theologian I formulate this path from an inner perspective, i.e. the perspective of a Christian who from my own tradition reflects upon the Christian faith in dialogue with the current context.

Are not such encounters the way in which God queries us Christians today? Through the confrontation with the other? Has God not always been the Other in our narratives, certainly when they threatened to close in upon themselves? Viewed from this perspective, is this not the message of the Old Testament? When Israel sits enslaved in Egypt, God through Moses breaks open this narrative of slavery and alienation. When the Jewish people shut themselves off from God, serve other gods, wreak injustice upon the poor and the stranger and allow their kings to become corrupt, then God sends prophets to pry open these closed narratives. The New Testament is similarly the narrative of the throwing open of closed narratives. In God's name Jesus forgives whoever has come to be entangled in sin, he criticises those who reduce true religion to the dry observance of the law, or to the punctilious bringing of necessary sacrifices, or to the all too easy misuse of religion for political ends. Jesus asks us to be as children, as the poor, the outcast and the persecuted (for they are blessed), as the widow who can only afford to offer one mite. He invites us to follow in the footsteps of the father who embraces his youngest prodigal son (and not to share the incomprehension of the oldest son). He teaches us to see God in the poor, naked, sick, hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, in short, the vulnerable and injured other: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food...?"

[...] Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:37, 40).

The whole metaphor and dynamic of the Christian narrative appears to be permeated with the interruption of its own narrative, its own identity, with the confrontation with the Other, God. The important motifs such as calling, exodus, mount, wilderness, cross, resurrection, conversion, pilgrimage, etc. illustrate this. The Christian narrative simply may not become a closed narrative. For precisely then God will break it open again. Interruption becomes here a theological category. Naturally, this takes on its ultimate shape in the resurrection of Jesus crucified on the cross. Precisely at that moment God makes it clear that one who lives like this Jesus of Nazareth, professed as the Christ by his disciples, cannot be enclosed by death but instead now has a future beyond it. Both in words and deeds, but more importantly through his life story, Jesus Christ has become the paradigm of the ‘open narrative’. Following Jesus carries with it the challenge to seek out the other who interrupts our narrative.

Remarkably, Jesus of Nazareth himself had to learn this according to the witness of the Matthew and Mark gospels (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-30). These evangelists after all narrate the following incidents. When Jesus departs to the district of Tyre and Sidon, he meets along the way a Canaanite or Syrophoenician woman (thus a non-Jew) who asks him to cure her daughter who is possessed by a demon. Jesus’ first reaction is to reject her saying that he has been sent to the Jewish people (‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’) even, indeed, that it is not good to concern oneself with the others (‘it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’). Whereupon the woman then says to him: ‘yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.’ At that moment even Jesus’ narrative is interrupted and he learns to open his own narrative even further so that there is room for the others as well. The woman’s faith allows God to become accessible beyond the borders of Israel.

The cultural interruption of the Christian narrative because of the surrounding de-traditionalisation offers Christians the chance to transform

their narrative into an open narrative (note that this does not signify the guarantee that this specific narrative is in fact really open). An open – interrupted – Christian narrative can then not only be culturally credible but also theologically legitimate. Christians then live out their narrative by virtue of the interruption that the encounter with the other brings about. In other words, they profess that Jesus has revealed God as one who breaks open their narratives in order that they too will be open narratives. The dialogue with the current culture, the confrontation with the diversity of religions and fundamental life options, offers them a key to authentically interpret the specific nature of the Christian narrative for today. The current cultural interruption of the Christian narrative turns into the opportunity for appreciating that the interruption is integral to the Christian narrative and, furthermore, that it is precisely there that God might be at work critiquing narratives where they are closing in on themselves and indicating new ways that lead to a deepening of the contemporary state of belief.

The title of this contribution, ‘The shortest definition of religion: interruption,’ is an intuition taken from Johan Baptist Metz.¹⁹ He wanted to make clear by this statement that Christian faith can never slip unpunished into a sort of bourgeois religion, seamlessly woven into the prevailing culture and society. After all, such religion seeks an all but too easy reconciliation thereby forgetting the tragic suffering that human existence is confronted with. For Metz there can be no Christian faith without tension or turmoil, without danger or menace. After all, Christians are bearers of the subversive, dangerous memory of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is why they actively seek out the boundaries of life and coexistence, moved as they are by the human histories of suffering that compels them towards a preferential option for the poor, the suffering and the oppressed. By its very nature, the Christian faith disrupts the histories of

¹⁹ See fn. 1. Johann Baptist Metz is one of the most renowned and influential theologians of the second half of the twentieth century. For Metz’s theology, see further the collection of excerpts and articles by Metz that traces the evolution of his ideas: *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie*, Mainz, 1997.

conqueror and vanquished and interrupts the ideologies of the powerful and the powerlessness of the victims.²⁰

I have tried to show how Metz's intuition can also be inspirational for a current theological reflection. I have used the category of 'interruption' in a double (even triple) sense and then too in the form of a paradox. I started with the 'cultural interruption' of the Christian tradition in our present-day society. For several decades now the transmission of this tradition has well nigh stopped flowing – what is more, many initiatives to spur its growth appear to work counter-productively. Despite (as many as) fifteen years of religious education and catechesis young adults of today are often only minimally and fragmentally initiated. The traditional channels and ways of transmitting tradition appear no longer to work. The relatively unproblematic initiation of yore has been interrupted. The Christian tradition and its community are facing a deep crisis that places their survival, albeit in Western Europe, at stake. But crises might also offer opportunities. It is at this point that I once again took up the term 'interruption', this time not merely as a cultural but also as theological category – as Metz did. I suggested that the fact that the Christian faith and its community no longer possess the quasi-monopoly on that which gives meaning in society and culture opens ways towards a rediscovery of that dangerous unrest pertaining to interruption. Faith in Jesus Christ then means precisely the unsettling of a comfortable existence. In this way the Christian narrative comes surprisingly close to what postmodern critical consciousness maintains: all grand identity-forming narratives (the Christian one included) reconcile too quickly and employ inclusion and exclusion mechanisms with respect to the other (if one so chooses, a third form of 'interruption'). Given that they harbour a blind spot to the tragedy and victims ensuing from this they therefore need to be interrupted. For Christians, however, this occurs in the name of the God who in history has stood on the boundary of time. The paradox that I thus wanted to develop in this contribution is that the 'cultural interruption' of the Christian tradition can help in the rediscovery of that theological interruption which constitutes

²⁰ For a detailed sketch and constructive critique of this theological position see among others my *Postmoderne politieke theologie? Johann Baptist Metz in gesprek met het actuele kritische bewustzijn*, in *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 39 (1999) 244-264.

the kernel of Christian faith (and this while in dialogue with postmodern critical consciousness).

For Metz it is particularly the confrontation with suffering that forms the impetus behind his search for a ‘dangerous’ theology of interruption. This confrontation compels him – in keeping with his *late modern* (neo-Marxist) dialogue partners (such as Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer) – towards developing a hermeneutics of suspicion that turns itself against those narratives that reconcile and forget all too easily. Today, however, a second – *postmodern* – opportunity presents itself. Along with the cultural interruption of the Christian tradition, Christians have at the same time been confronted with (religious) diversity and otherness. Together, they both question Christian faith at its core.²¹ Here a theology of interruption tends rather to develop a hermeneutics of contingency, which aims to maintain the radical historical and specific, particular, character of the Christian tradition. It is however my conviction that such a hermeneutics of contingency, when well understood, includes a hermeneutics of suspicion. I will briefly explain what I mean by this. Attention for the suffering and the oppressed has certainly defined the theological agenda, especially of modern theology, in the second half of the twentieth century. Political theologies were complemented by the addition of liberation theologies, feminist theologies, black theologies, etc. Each of these has been the result of a critical-productive dialogue with forms of late modern social critical consciousness. Whoever chooses to engage in the current dialogue with the postmodern context cannot ignore this theological lesson from the recent past. Otherwise, the rediscovery of one’s own identity and its boundaries in confrontation with the other slip once again all too easily into a closing-in of one’s own narrative. The other then quickly becomes the forgotten one, the one who too quickly becomes shut into or out of our narratives. A hermeneutics of contingency will therefore criticise both Christian narratives and other ideologies whenever their totalitarian aspirations leave out room for what is other and thereby come to victimise it.

²¹ Metz also alludes to this intuition in his later articles, after 1985, but does not really develop it further. See for instance his *Unterwegs zu einer nachidealistischen Theologie*, in J. Bauer (ed.), *Entwürfe der Theologie*, Graz/Vienna/Cologne, 1985, 203-233; and some of the contributions in *Zum Begriff der neuen Politischen Theologie*.

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