

Public Theology and Institutional Economics

Public Theology and Institutional Economics:

All is Economy

By

Toine van den Hoogen

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-3961-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3961-7

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INTRODUCTION

This book contains the results of my research during the last five years within the domain of public theology. Public theology is a research domain within theology for which interest has developed over the past decades, and in which questions are raised regarding the interplay of questions which arise in the public space of our society on the one hand, and theology on the other. In the first chapter I will take an in-depth look at the way how this research domain should be understood, and how I myself choose to understand it.

In the first two chapters I will also show that and how the economy and economic science provides the theme for the research of which this book is the result. The theme appears to be of such importance within the public debates which we conduct regarding the public nature of our co-existence because these debates often refer to social institutions and public policy. The book is therefore entitled *Public theology and Institutional Economics*. I have added a subtitle: *All is economy*. Formulating it such may seem somewhat audacious or even very biased. Nevertheless, I chose this title. For the public space of our co-existence is permeated by the economy. Economy matters. And many of the big questions in the public debate on our collective co-existence which occupy us daily relate to the market, social institutions of the market, and the lifestyle which we have developed within our market economy. Under the title *All is economy* I investigate how these big questions could be brought into an interplay with questions regarding human dignity and the meaning and purpose of our existence.

I pose these questions as a Christian theologian. Therefore, I also want to relate these big questions in the public debate on our collective co-existence to the sources of the Christian tradition of faith. I conduct this research from a theological interest, and I am fascinated by what such an interplay could look like.

I am not unaware that during the last decades of the twentieth century such questions regarding an interplay between the public domain of our co-existence and the sources of the Christian tradition of faith were already

occupying the minds of some theologians. Specifically, the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz - by means of his numerous publications during the last four decades of the 20th century - contributed towards what he called a 'new political theology'. With the concept 'politics' also Metz wanted to re-orientate theology towards questions regarding the public space of our co-existence.

Many theologians found this troubling. After all, they reasoned, are there not enough other important questions regarding the life of faith to occupy theologians? An eloquent example of these reservations is given in the title of a book by the Dutch theologian Harrie Kuitert,¹ *Alles is politiek maar politiek is niet alles* ('Everything is politics, but politics is not everything'). In choosing the title of my book, I was often reminded of Kuitert's title.

Unlike Kuitert, I have chosen not to complement the subtitle *All is economy* with any similarly restrictive addition. For I do not want to limit this title, but rather understand it in two ways at the same time. *All is economy* implies that – in our contemporary co-existence – big questions are playing out in our market economy with regard to the redistribution of wealth. But it also implies big questions regarding wealth and poverty. And it further implies that our notions of a successful or failed existence are characterised by it.

In this book I investigate how such questions in such a context could be brought into relation with the sources of the Christian tradition of faith. I will explain why this calls for hermeneutics. And I will make clear that in this book I will focus the relationships with the Christian tradition on the question how our questions could be brought into relation with the spiritual theology of Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389). I chose this focus because Gregory is one of the greatest theologians in the history of Christian thinking, both in the Western and Eastern traditions. At the Council of Chalcedon (451) he was referred to as *the theologian*. His spiritual theology had become the foundation of a Christian approach to the Divinity of God and the three Names of the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

¹ Kuitert, H., (1986), *Alles is politiek maar politiek is niet alles*, Baarn: TenHave.

Recent historical research² has shown that Gregory's spiritual theology should be understood against the background of the question what 'good governance' implies, and what is characteristic of it. When Gregory writes about the Divinity of God and the Names of the Godhead, it is therefore situated in a framework which in contemporary terms we may call that of public theology. In Gregory's time, one of the central questions was what makes *paideia* - the form and orientation of action - *orthos*, that is: right, righteous, correct, founded on adequate grounds. In the framework of such questions Gregory was formed as rhetor for public functions, and in the framework of such questions he felt himself responsible in his capacities as intellectual, priest and bishop.

In Gregory's view one could and ought to approach reality in its totality and all the domains therein not only in a socio-economic or political way, but also as an *oikonomia tou theou*, an organized whole of relationships in relation to God. Also in this sense my subtitle is apt: *All is economy*.

At the end of this introduction, it remains for me to thank two people by name. In the first instance, the South African researcher Schalk van der Merwe (Cape Town). He translated the original Dutch text, and as critical reader, contributed to clearer formulations in a number of passages. In the second place, our oldest son Joris van den Hoogen (Rotterdam), who, with the precision of an architect who knows that every last detail of a plan is crucial to ensure a sound structure, took care of the layout. An author could only wish such co-readers to other authors!

² Elm, S., (2012) *Sons of Hellenism, Fathers of the Church; Emperor Julian, Gregory of Nazianus, and the Vision of Rome*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.

PERSPECTIVES ON A PUBLIC THEOLOGY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

1.1. Developing a public theology from within the semantics of modern societies

The *International Journal of Public Theology* (IJPT) introduces itself on the Internet as follows:

“Public theology is the result of the growing need for theology to interact with public issues of contemporary society. It seeks to engage in dialogue with different academic disciplines such as politics, economics, cultural studies, religious studies, as well as with spirituality, globalization and society in general”

In a recent *Editorial* (2012, Vol.6, Issue 2) Sebastian Kim (editor in chief) writes that the journal focuses on the research of theologians relating to one of the six chief domains of what he calls – in reference to Jürgen Habermas – “the public sphere”. These are the state, the market, the media, academia, civil society and religious communities. Theology, writes Kim, is characterized by a growing need to confront theological traditions with the three “sets of rights” through which these domains originated and are being characterized: the right to critical debate and political representation in these domains; the right to personal freedom and the inviolability of the personal sphere; the right to personal property and equality under the law. Public theology investigates questions which, in this time of globalisation, are related to these points of departure and the characteristics of the mentioned six domains. According to this concept of public theology, these questions arise when theology joins dialogue over these points of departure and characteristics with political and economic sciences, as well as studies of culture and studies of religion, including studies of spirituality.

With this a first definition is given of what this leading international journal understands under the adjective “public” in the term “public

theology". A public theology is urgently required in the 21st century because cultural, social and political landscapes are drastically changing. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck writes³ that we are living with old maps which in such landscapes no longer describe any recognisable or passable roads. If Beck's observation is correct, we in the humanities – and therefore also theology – do not (yet) dispose over "maps" providing points of orientation or indicating passable roads in these public landscapes.

The theologian/ sociologist of religion Karl Gabriel (Münster) already once explained how the metaphor "maps" here could be scientifically understood, why the "maps" no longer work, and also which kinds of "maps" do work. In his text "Konzepte von Öffentlichkeit und ihre theologischen Konsequenzen" (Concepts of the Public and their theological consequences)⁴ he concludes that – viewed from the perspective of systems theory – the term public reality and the idiom associated with it belong to the semantics (the field of meaning) of modern societies. What characterizes the field of meaning of the word "modern"? These semantics are inherently part of modern societies, and therefore need to be investigated by public theology.

The semantics of modernity

What does the word "public" signify within these *semantics*? What kind of idiom is this? According to Gabriel, in modern societies the meaning of "public" is determined by three contrasts of meaning in which it is applied. First of all, in the contrast between public functions and private roles. A good example is the debate on how often and to what extent the Dutch royal family should be portrayed by the media. The appropriate boundaries continue to be a topic of public debate. A second contrast in which the meaning of the word public is determined, is that between public accessibility to communication, knowledge and science on the one hand, and seclusion and secrecy on the other. Controversial examples are the global debates and developments surrounding whistle blowers like Assange and Snowden. This has become directly related to whether and

³ U.Beck, Multiculturalism or Cosmopolitanism. How can we describe and understand the diversity of the World?, in: *Social Sciences in China*, 2011, 32-4, 52-58.

⁴ K.Gabriel, Konzepte von Öffentlichkeit und ihre theologischen Konsequenzen, in: E.Arens und H.Hoping (Ed.), *Wieviel Theologie verträgt die Öffentlichkeit?*, Herder:Freiburg-Basel-Wien 2000 (=Quaestiones Disputatae, 183),16-37.

how the Internet is or should be accessible to all, regardless of their intentions. A third contrast within which the word “public” acquires meaning, is that between, on the one hand, the possibility and right of every person to freely formulate opinions and take a stance on any conceivable issue, and on the other, the transparency required within the state and the economy. In the media for instance, we fiercely debate “matters of taste”, as testified to by numerous TV shows (for instance on good cooking, on sadness and joy at departure for a long stay abroad), “matters of language” (for instance on spelling, or the best novel) and historical ones (who is the most important politician of the year?) And have the periodic elections for public office not themselves become a TV-show in the first instance? The third contrast – according to Gabriel – contains the first (public function next to private role) and second (publicly accessible knowledge next to secret knowledge) ones. For the third contrast most clearly shows that in the public domain personal, free opinions over and discursive validation of what we do and want in our society, continue to be related to one another in a complex and contrasting fashion. A good recent example is the media debate on the import of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s recent H.J. School lecture (02.09.2013). He argued that the Netherlands needed to change, and to participate in the technological and geopolitical changes in the world. The debate which immediately ensued concerned this question: what has the prime minister actually done when giving this lecture? Did he express his personal, liberal vision of the future? Or did he promote a specific party-political feat, by drawing attention to a liberal notion through his odium (Mark Rutte is a well-known liberal politician)? Has he, as head of the cabinet, developed a theory which is binding to his coalition partners? In short: could what he said be discursively validated as a framework of coalition policy, or rather as one of the private notions of a liberal politician?

The examples given make it clear that the idiom of the public domain in our societies is characterized from within by the roles of the media in our society. Gabriel is besides of the opinion that the roles of religion and the public domain cannot be reduced to what is reported in the media. For while it may be that within the first contrast the only roles left to religion are as idiom within the private domain, in the second and third contrasts the idioms of religion, her rituals and her message unmistakably continue to play all kinds of different roles. The recent choice of pope is an example in this regard, as is the attention accorded to the Dalai Lama in global politics. And the financial and moral scandals of various churches would

never have had such an impact had their role merely been limited to the private domain.

Public theology is aimed at – one could already conclude – investigating the roles played by religion within these domains of our societies. In Gabriel’s understanding, this is a task which does not provide public theology with any *direct* access to these domains. For these domains are only traceable and discernible in the mirror held up by the media and its imagination of this reality. The media provides – says Gabriel – the form of “Selbstbeobachtung der Gesellschaft” (self-observation of society).⁵ How citizens in civil societies are able to reflect on their reality and act within it is characterized by this indirect accessibility. These images and options for action are characterized by information or a lack of information, emphasizing certain aspects at the expense of others. A public theology which wants to investigate the relevant domains is of course first of all confronted with the paucity of attention which – through processes of marginalisation – remains for the roles of religion within the private domain. There is therefore little public interest in a theology or church which focuses on this private domain. According to Gabriel, theological investigation should therefore not be focused on the traditional roles of institutionalized religion. Much rather he pleads for focusing theological investigation on – what he calls - “die Sozialform des Religiösen” (the social form of religion) within domains such as sport, economy and recreation.⁶ Core questions are then which images of fulfillment and decline of human existence the agents in these domains have, how these images could be theologically interpreted, and how theological investigation could bring critical counter-images (unterbrechende Gegenöffentlichkeit) to the table.

These – finally – normative statements of Marcel from 2000 are further given weight by recent empirical research. In the study *The Public Significance of Religion* (2011) of the International Society for Empirical Research in Theology, the theologian Hans-Georg Ziebertz writes that current empirical research is casting much doubt on the “strongest” version of the so-called theory of secularization (religion is doomed to a linear decline).⁷ Ziebertz writes, following the Spanish-American

⁵ Gabriel, a.c.21.

⁶ Gabriel, a.c.23-26.

⁷ See A. van Harskamp, Van secularisering, seculariteit & sacralisering - ...en van wat theologie te doen staat, in: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie*, Jrg. 50, nr.3, 2010, 304-321.

sociologist of religion José Casanova, that religion has now much rather landed up in a process of de-privatisation. He quotes Casanova's definition of the concept: "...the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation, and redrawing of the boundaries...".⁸ Empirical research makes it clear that religion has not returned to the "old-days religion", as was once thought. Ziebertz points out that the words "religion abandons its assigned place" imply that processes of social change compel the social sciences to review their own assumptions. The empirical compels a distinction between two points of view through which the assumption of the public meaninglessness of religion could be investigated and understood anew. In the first instance, says Ziebertz, from a European study it would appear that many young people (students) attach more value to the public meaning of religion than its private meanings (existential and spiritual meaning, life orientation). Secondly, it turns out that to the sub-system of religion, the functional differentiation of social domains includes the transgression of their boundaries. Even if religion is characteristic of a cognitive minority, within a pluralistic society and culture a religious community may, by employing various strategies (e.g. isolation, adaptation, insertion, critical dialogue), be able to (re)gain influence in politics, the education system or the economy. In this, the difference between Islam and Christianity which are both visibly present in our Western society plays a remarkable role. To the extent that Islam is rejected, the chances of Christianity improve. And a second striking point is the conclusion of sociologists that in the cultural traditions of Western societies many citizens who have never seen the inside of a temple, church or mosque nevertheless continue to hold and practice values which historically originated from these religious traditions.

When one therefore abandons the strong meaning of secularisation, and turns to investigate instead in which complexes of meaning the – often still privatized (!) – roles of religion land up, one also develops an eye for the "fusions" of religion and culture, religion and economy, religion and politics.⁹ Religion unmistakably plays an often diffuse role in what Norris

⁸ H.-G. Ziebertz, Dispute about the Public Significance of Religion: An Opening Reflection, in: *L. J. Francis and H.-G. Ziebertz (Eds.), The Public Significance of Religion*, Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2011, 1-17,6.

⁹ One of my students did research in commission of the Nijmegen local council on the reasons why local homosexual Muslim youths were having such a hard time "coming out", despite supportive council policy. It transpired that, apart from all

and Inglehart has called the “shaping of worldviews and defining of cultural zones”.¹⁰ If one assumes that public theology has a role to play here, it would amongst others include that public theology investigates these fusions in which the “worldviews and cultural zones” originate and disappear. The investigation of these fusions seems to me to be a central task of public theology. With this, Gabriel’s point is particularized in an important way. Gabriel emphasizes that theology needs to investigate the roles religion *continues* to play in the public realm. In line with Casanova, Ziebertz emphasizes that theology must *bring* these roles into the public realm. Because this realm - the public debate on society’s course - itself knows the continuous shifting of boundaries between public and private roles; between public accessibility of communication, knowledge and science on the one hand, and seclusion and secrecy on the other; and between on one hand, the possibility and right of every person to freely formulate opinions and take a stance on any conceivable issue, and on the other, the transparency required within the state and the economy.

For now, my answer to the question “what is public theology?”, is that it is the form of theological investigation which is aimed at the modern media-mediated complexes of meaning which arise in the construction of world views and cultural zones from the fusions between religion and culture, religion and economics, and religion and politics.

With this I have defined public theology’s material object of investigation. The material object is formed by the semantics in use in modern societies, because these are incorporated within their systemic character, the field of meaning which is used as communication-means, and seized upon in forms of self-reflection. These semantics are the determination of the material object of investigation in public theology. But I still have not explained yet what a theological study of these semantics entails. After all, I still have not explained what constitutes public theology’s formal object of investigation, in other words: from which *perspective* the semantics of modern societies is studied by theology. And just as little have I explained

kinds of (faulty) assumptions held by these youths and their fathers (!)concerning what the Quran has to say on the matter, all kinds of socio-cultural and educational factors played a big part. Following the social unrest in Zaltbommel in 2010 in which Moroccan youths were involved, another student was commissioned by the Gelderland-South District Police to investigate the role knowledge of religion plays in the province’s police policy, with the objective of increasing the cultural competence of police agents at street level. The outcome of this investigation presented a similar “fusion”.

¹⁰ Quoted by Ziebertz, a.c.14.

whether such a public theology is possible and desirable. In the next part of this section I investigate what a theological study of these semantics entails (the perspective of a theological investigation into the semantics of modern societies), and then whether this is possible and desirable.

Theological interest in modernity

What constitutes a *theological* study of the semantics of modern societies? What is the perspective of a theological study of these semantics? One could counter that the semantics of modern societies is not a theme for theological investigation at all. One could take the position that it is a theme best dealt with by the social sciences. Ulrich Beck is after all a sociologist. And when he writes about “maps”, he does so as a sociologist. This metaphor forms part of his theories on “reflexive modernity”. Beck understands this as a new phase of modernization.

Modernization within the horizon of experience of pre-modernity is being displaced by reflexive modernization. In the nineteenth century, privileges of rank and religious world views were being demystified; today the same is happening to the understanding of science and technology in the classical industrial society, as well as to the modes of existence in work, leisure, the family and sexuality. Modernization within the paths of industrial society is being replaced by a modernization of the principles of industrial society. [...] The thesis of this book [Risk Society] is: we are witnessing not the end but the beginning of modernity – that is, of modernity beyond its classical industrial design.¹¹

Also the concept “public theology” is – one could justly counter – no theological object. It could be understood as phenomenon of the social sciences. An example of the application of the term “public theology” as phenomenon of the social sciences is given in the recent article “The Clash of Public Theologies? Rethinking the Concept of Religion in Global Politics”¹² by the American political scientist Sandal. He argues that too many researchers in his field of study assume that religion could be construed as an analytical category in the domain of international politics, and as an independent variable which provides the explanation for numerous conflicts. According to Sandal, the best known example is Samuel Huntington’s theory of the “Clash of Civilisations”. Huntington

¹¹ Cf. Beck, U. (1992), *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, London: Page, 11.

¹² Sandal, N.A., The Clash of Public Theologies?: Rethinking the Concept of Religion in Global Politics, in: *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 2012 37:66-83.

argues that in global politics, the conflicts could for the greater part be traced back not so much to ideological differences, as to the differences between cultures and their religious traditions. In their analyses, argues Sandal, many scientists conceive of religions as a monolithic reality. But this kind of “black boxing” runs the risk of misconstruing the dynamics of cultural identity and tradition. Religious belief, he argues, is embedded in a contingent mix of social and political factors. There is no context-free causation of social processes in which religion brings about certain types of action. Besides, there is no “single definition” of the liberal-modern concept of religion.

The contextual dependence of the religious factor entails, argues Sandal, that the variable “religion” always refers to social manifestations of the consciousness of a group with respect to the meaning of texts and traditions. And therefore, according to Sandal, it is more adequate (and better falsifiable) to replace the variable “religion” in the investigation into international politics with the concept “public theology”. “Public theologies serve as ‘indicators’ or observable manifestations of religion and capture subtleties that religion, as an analytical concept, cannot”.¹³

Sandal then defines the concept “public theology” as concerned with the phenomenon that activities in the common space of political and social life are a reflection of a religion or a life-philosophical tradition. The agents signify and reconstruct economic, political or cultural phenomena and their institutional forms from an engagement with a living religious tradition. Sandal distinguishes four dimensions within which this signification and reconstruction take place, and could be investigated: the substantive dimension (the constitutive concepts which co-determine political action), the spiritual dimension (the religious traditions and texts on which the signification has bearing), the spatial dimension (the geographically determined traditions and heritage to which the signification relates), and the dimension of time (the historical context of signification).

Public theology in Sandal’s theory is thus the name for a phenomenon, not the name of a specific type of scientific investigation! Sandal is of the opinion that – in order to explain the great conflicts in international relations – Huntington’s idiom (Clash of civilisations) is better replaced by one of a “Clash of public theologies”. The phenomenon Sandal investigates has both normative and functional characteristics. The phenomenon Sandal has in mind is a form of “worldviews” and “cultural zones”, and is

¹³ Sandal, a.c. 69.

characterized by a fusion of religion and culture, religion and politics, and religion and economics. Sandal introduces the concept “public theology” for use within his scientific domain, that of political science.

With Sandal’s terminology in mind it has become even more pressing to pose the question what meaning one could try to give as Christian theologian (in other words, in the scientific field of theology) to public theology.¹⁴ What makes an investigation into the phenomena studied by Sandal - and which could be regarded as examples of reflexive modernity - into a theological investigation, an investigation which does not (only) belong within the faculty of social and political sciences, but (also and particularly) within the faculty of divinity?

In order to answer the question which perspective theology employs in investigating the semantics of modern societies, it seems useful to first clarify what is meant by the word “modern”. Three contrasts of meaning have already been indicated above in connection with modern societies. But a further explanation is needed regarding the perspective from which these three contrasts appear “modern”. What does it mean that we label (our) societies as “modern”? Does the word “modern” mean more than simply “contemporary”? And does this mean that there are also non-modern societies? Does it mean that we are only talking about societies of earlier times, from a period before contemporary history, or a world which falls outside contemporary history? It would also be useful to clarify the formal aspect if the concept “modern”.

In the social sciences” contemporary theorizing on “modernity” this formal aspect is indicated by the term “reflexive modernity”. “...(M)odernity has been indeed transformed; though not into postmodernity so much as into *reflexive* modernity”.¹⁵ In order to determine what is here understood under “modern”, I turn to the research of Margareth Archer. For she has made a number of important adaptations to the systems theory approach to modernity with which I opened this chapter, and with that she has parted with the strict systems theory-based approach of Ulrich Beck and others. In this I want to follow her.

¹⁴ Thus the historian March-Dominique Chenu dreamt - as he related to me during one of the numerous personal conversations we had in 1985 - that a dogma-historical sketch of the theology of grace constructed by employing the method of the *Annales*, would be able to elicit new theological questions concerning the reality and the concept of “grace”.

¹⁵ Scott, L. (1993), Reflexive Modernization: The Aesthetic Dimension, in: *Theory Culture Society* 10/1,p.2.

Just like Beck, Archer is of the opinion that we are experiencing a profound change in the way in which people in our Western societies understand themselves and their world¹⁶. Just like Beck she summarizes the core of these changes as “extended reflexivity”. This implies “that individuals have become ever more free of structure; in fact they have to redefine structure (or as Giddens puts it, tradition), meaning that much greater demands are placed upon personal reflexivity to make a life of one’s own”¹⁷. Beck regards this as part of the “the demise of structure”. In our societies, everything becomes fluid. Every time we create aspects of our social relationships, we are overwhelmed by a flow of thoughts and attitudes which provide no holdfast. Beck therefore characterizes our society as a “risk society”. Archer on the other hand stresses the fact that at the same time this flow is coupled to a swift increase in new institutions. The changes are not at all without form. Around the 2007 global financial crisis for instance, many measures were taken to reduce the intransparency of international money flows. A movement like Occupy (2011) rebels against specifically this, and while it is true that Occupy is not a centrally directed organization, it does display structures which makes the movement recognizable in the diverse financial centres in which it operates. This is one of the first of Archer’s corrections to the theory of reflexive modernity. It is not only a question of the “demise of structure”, but also of new structures. A second point is related to this. Protest against new institutionalizations indicate that – also in the period of “late modernity” – new forms of agency are at play. Archer emphasises that the World Wide Web originated at a time which also witnessed the expansion of multi-national corporations, and the swift growth of financial markets. Unlike Beck, Archer sees in such developments that our society is not only characterized by agents losing the compass they were previously able to derive from a set of secular or religious value-orientations, thereby running ongoing risks, as all (life) choices had become changeable and contingent. Archer also sees that agents are embedded in new structures and that they bring forth a new style of action. In Archer’s approach to reflexive modernity it is not only a matter of the conflict between individuals and systemic structures in our societies. Her approach pays much attention to (new) forms of agency, to the (changing) lifestyles in which these are embedded, and to the (new) structures to which these are restricted and within which opportunities develop.

¹⁶ Archer, M.S.(2012), *The Reflexive Imperative in Late Modernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1-7.

¹⁷ id. 3

What does a theological study of the semantics of modern societies entail? What is the perspective of a theological study of these semantics? Modernity's field of meaning I understand within the theoretical framework as developed by Archer. As theologian, I share the American scientist of religion Jeffrey Stout's point of view that a theological approach cannot be developed but as a "reflective expression (of) commitments that would otherwise remain implicit in the lives of (...) religious communities".¹⁸ Stout emphasises that, from within a pluralistic society, one could certainly entertain the notion that religious communities and their theologians are only in conversation with themselves, and thereby wont to assume that their belief in the existence of God is a self-evident horizon. But, he argues, in secular democracies this assumption is difficult to uphold. Because when it comes to debating big ethical issues, numerous groups and individuals who do not share the faith - or are even hostile towards it - readily participate. Excluding these people by theologians would be in conflict with the democratic character of the public order. Therefore, theologians cannot retreat into the circle of their religious communities. It is the theologian's calling, puts Stout, "to discourse outside of the church...in a kind of thick description (of their religious convictions, TvDH) that allows fellow citizens to correct prejudice and misunderstandings concerning what believers think and care about".¹⁹

For that matter - argues Stout, and in which I follow him - this task does not only apply to theologians or religious thinkers in general. It applies to all philosophies of life, including those of atheists. When theologians bring to the fore their points of view and practical options in - as Stout calls it - an "expressive equilibrium", within a democracy they can never assume that these options and viewpoints would be shared by all of modern society's participants. Therefore Stout sees it as the task of a public theology to formulate forms of "expressive equilibrium" and thereby make them accessible to open and critical debate. In our society also theologians - together with others - are always faced with the task of making a contribution towards ensuring that society does not become an enclave - the outcome of a strategy of retreating behind the limitations of

¹⁸ Stout, J. (2005), *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 112.

¹⁹ Id. In this book of mine, "Thick description" refers to "the participants production of accounts of persons, events and experiences". Cfr. Cromdal, J., Karin Osvaldsson and Daniel Persson Thunqvist, Context that matters: producing "thick-enough descriptions" in initial emergency reports, in: *Journal of Pragmatics* 40(2008) 927-959, here: 930.

one's own community, or of one which regards the largest common denominator as the most relevant measure of truth. Under "expressive equilibrium" Stout understands that a theological and/ or religious point of view is formulated in terms of a truth claim, for instance the truth claim which, showing courage of conviction, emphasizes that human salvation lies in the history and person of Jesus Christ. Expressive equilibrium is then a characteristic of this truth claim when, on the one hand, it is not reduced to the most commonly accepted notion of redemption which is unlikely to elicit resistance or objections from anyone, but at the same time neither reduced to a truth which withdraws itself from critical questioning, sceptical of such claims. Stout is convinced that a pluralistic form of democratic coexistence is well-served by the formulation and debating of these (and other truth-claims). Public theology therefore ought to contribute to public debate by means of "thick descriptions" which are open to public criticism and susceptible to being conceived as theological interpretations.

A theological investigation into the semantics of modern societies will therefore be an investigation into the thick descriptions of modernity. In line with my line of reasoning above, such a theological investigation will be aimed at thick descriptions of (new) forms of agency, of the (changing) lifestyles in which these forms of agency are embedded, and the (new) structures which delimit them, and within which opportunities develop. The perspective of theological investigation into these thick descriptions lies in investigating which truth-claims are enclosed in these forms of agency and structures, and how these thick descriptions relate to the expressive equilibrium which, to the theological researcher, is that of his religious community.

By thus defining the theological interest in modernity, I also want to indicate that a theological investigation into the semantics of modernity is hermeneutic by nature. After all, as I wrote, theology investigates how the truth-claims embedded in the thick descriptions of modernity relate to the expressive equilibrium which a theological researcher regards as that of his religious community. As such, the expressive equilibrium is not a fact which stands outside of the theologian/ researcher's relationship to his/ her religious community, nor is it a fact which stands outside of the theologian/ researcher's relationship to the notions of what he/ she deems to be other relevant (religious and/ or non-religious) positions and convictions. The theologian/ researcher's expressive equilibrium is always the outcome of a complex history of interpretations and reconstructions. No "black box" is given which could serve as point of reference to the

theologian/ researcher in investigating modernity's thick descriptions and associated truth-claims. Much rather, as a result of the hermeneutic nature of the expressive equilibrium, the theologian/ researcher - by naming, analysing and evaluating the truth-claims hidden within modernity – unavoidably provides a critical continuation of this history of interpretation and (re)construction.

An example of the hermeneutic nature of the expressive equilibrium to which a theologian refers in his/ her research, is provided by the work of the founder of contemporary public theology, Max Stackhouse²⁰. Stackhouse is a theologian in the American “Reformed tradition”, a continuation of Abraham Kuyper’s theological legacy. According to him, one of the core questions of theology concerns the foundation, nature and orientation of a Christian social responsibility. This responsibility is founded upon the Christian’s calling to deliberately and creatively answer to God’s grace. In line with Kuyper’s doctrine on the sovereignty of spheres (the doctrine of the gradual arrangement of social institutions, each demanding a different kind of responsibility from Christians), Stackhouse sees the social responsibility of Christians as part of a whole arrangement of relations all related to the sovereignty of God’s arrangement of the social world. These arrangements structure the social responsibility of Christians. These arrangements are intrinsically part of God’s covenant with humanity. This covenant is the foundation of the reciprocal relations of the institutions within which the human calling may be realized. And this structure of the covenant encompasses all of creation.

With this, Stackhouse has formulated an expressive equilibrium. His Christian interpretation of public reality leans on and departs from this theology of covenant. This theology of covenant is the “expressive centre” of Stackhouse’s notions concerning public theology’s investigation into the semantics of modern societies. And also this theology of covenant has the nature of equilibrium, for it is the effect of the structures of natural rights, insights into social responsibility, human rights, economic and political questions, brought into a debate with non-Christian and non-religious convictions on these themes. The truth claim of this expressive equilibrium is succinctly formulated by the theologian Schweiker. In a commentary on the work of Stackhouse he writes: “all humanity is made in the image of God, and...by the common grace of creation,...enabled to

²⁰ Vgl. D.K.Hainsworth and S.R. Paeth, Introduction, in: Hainsworth, D.K., and S.R.Paeth (Eds.), *Public Theology for a Global Society. Essays in Honor of Max L. Stackhouse*, Eerdmans:Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.,2010, viii-xx.

participate in the formation and maintenance of the modules of ordered interaction that we call institutions”.²¹

This theology of covenant is, as said, one of the Reformed Church’s convictions, and thereby an example of the hermeneutic nature of the expressive equilibrium. After all, the Reformed Church leans on the theological thinking of Abraham Kuyper, which in turn entails an interpretation of Calvin’s theology. The truth claim of this theology of covenant therefore has an intrinsically hermeneutic character. And this also applies to the thick descriptions of social responsibility, human rights, of economy and politics associated with this theology of covenant. They do not reflect a consciousness of *reflexive modernity*, but rather a thinking in terms of natural rights and stable social arrangements, which are taken to be reducible to a metaphysical foundation of human co-existence. No attention is given to new forms of agency, changing lifestyles or shifting social structures.

1.2. On metaphysics and theological investigation

Does a theological investigation into the semantics of modern societies not per definition require one to reflect on the metaphysical dimension of theology’s truth claim? How else could a theologian speak of God, grace and covenant? After all, reflexive modernity implies that agents continue to fix and construct their compasses anew! And, if it is so that every theological truth claim demands reflection upon the metaphysical dimension of this truth-claim, could theological investigation really be taking seriously the nature of reflexive modernity? These questions concern the possibility and desirability of a theological investigation into the semantics of modern societies.

In Stout’s reasoning it is very undesirable when theological reflection contributes towards, and is the expression of, a cultural enclave within society. I share this notion. Theology which creates and reflects an enclave is no public theology. In Stout’s reasoning it is concerned with the forms of ethics and the ethical aspects of religious convictions. A point of view to which one is personally committed, is critical and susceptible to criticism if it could also be contested on the basis of fair and rational criticism which is recognizable and could be recognized by all within society. A life-philosophical or ethical notion does not need to be reduced

²¹ W. Schweiker, *Public Theology and the Cosmopolitan Conscience*, in: *Hainsworth and Paeth*, o.c. 123-138.126.

to a point of view which is so general that no one could have any reasonable objections towards it. This happens whenever a viewpoint initially derived from religious tradition, through conversion into secular idiom, ceases to convey anything else but notions regarding freedom, autonomy and human consciousness. But neither should the wording be so specific and water-tight that only members of the same religious or ethical community are able to participate. This happens whenever God's agency is formulated as preceding and making possible human action and is thereby pressed into the service of confessional language. The equilibrium of these two extremes makes a point of view to which one is personally committed both critical and open to criticism. In my opinion, theological language is critical and open to criticism if discourses on freedom, autonomy and human consciousness are recognized in their own right, and moreover form part of a "thinking towards God". This expression was coined by the Dutch theologian Piet Schoonenberg S.J. (1911-1999). With this he meant to say that theology does not depart from the concept and conception of God as if God was a definable object, readily at our grasp. Theology is a human and religious approach to our reality in which an attempt is made to approach the mystery of the divine in a way which respects the mystery and does not argue it to tatters, but which also does justice to our reality. The religious-confessional language which a religious community employs as a ground of its existence, of action and as expression of a dynamics of consciousness, is in academia - therefore also in academic theology - always subject to forms of philosophical, social and psychological criticism which originate from a rational distrust of religious communities and their idioms.

This reasoning only says something about the extremities which need to be avoided when a theological investigation into the semantics of modern societies is being undertaken. But theology has not only to avoid these extremities. Theological traditions also contain possibilities of expressing thinking towards God which are both critical and open to criticism. In order to clarify this, I will follow a line of thought developed by Karl Rahner, a German Jesuit and priest (1904-1984), and one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth century.

The tradition of apologetics²² (the age-old name of foundational theology) has raised two questions, both of them focal in the tradition of foundational theology: in the act of confessing our faith, how can we be

²² Cf. Hoogen, T.v.d.,(2011), *A Taste of God. On spirituality and reframing foundational theology*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 29-34.

certain that the act of faith is evoked by a God who reveals himself to humans, and how can we *substantiate* the act of faith in a manner that is appropriate to the message but at the same time rationally accountable, intellectually plausible to others and hence communicable in a cultural community?²³

Should one remain serene about this heterogeneity and therefore about the subordination? It is an urgent question, certainly at the beginning of the 21st century in Western culture with its history of secularisation and pursuit of intellectual autonomy.

To Rahner's mind critical theological reflection on the question must first of all determine whether it is asked in a philosophical perspective, hence in the framework of a philosophical doctrine of God, or in a theological perspective, hence in the framework of a theology of grace. Rahner works in a spiritual context, so the question about the heteronomy of the object of faith should be put in the perspective of a theology of grace. To Rahner the performance of faith stems from questions about the theological significance of the ritual of baptism or the theological basis of the priesthood. Such practical questions inevitably raise the issue whether and how one can be certain about an existential choice and what the nature of such certainty is. For theologically a hallmark of such existential choices (life as a baptised person or a priest) is that one way or another they entail participation in divine reality, which in Christian terms is expressed by words like "God's salvific will" or "the reality of Christ". Traditional theology refers to participation in God's supernatural life and sharing in his supernatural grace. That is why Rahner answers the question about the heteronomy of a believer's faith in the perspective of a theology of grace.

The affirmation of faith involved in such existential choices, according to Rahner, is a form of knowledge. He sees it as a form of knowledge rather than of volition or desire, because such choices express the person's freedom of choice. If it is in fact an existential choice and not something imposed on the person, these occasions show who and what the person is and she emerges as a free subject. Humans are free subjects insofar as their relationship to an object of knowledge that they have as knowing subjects includes a relationship with themselves. Rahner calls this the transcendental structure of knowledge. A relationship with oneself is the original,

²³ Cf. Fössel TH. (2005), Warum ein Existential *übernatürlich* ist. Anmerkungen zum kontroversen Diskussion um Karl Rahners Theologoumenon vom "übernatürlichen Existential", in: *Theologie und Philosophie*, vol.80/3, 389-411.

irreducible, freedom generating precondition for human knowledge. Rahner refers to the concomitant transcendental experience, the source and horizon of knowledge of reality. "This transcendental experience is not constituted by the fact that one speaks of it ... it is always there but for this reason it can also be constantly overlooked ... it can never have the novel attraction of an object that is unexpectedly encountered ... we can ... speak of the term of this transcendental experience only indirectly."²⁴

In Rahner's view knowledge of God as expressed in the theology of grace is a form of knowledge that also has the character of a transcendental experience. It is not knowledge of an object among other objects that can be grasped from outside, like situations in the world around us, images and thoughts. "Insofar as this subjective, non-objective luminosity of the subject in its transcendence is always orientated towards the holy mystery, the knowledge of God is always present unthematically and without name, and not just when we begin to speak of it ... he whom we call "God" encounters us in silence, encounters [humans] as the absolute and incomprehensible, as the term of his transcendence which cannot be incorporated into a system of coordinates. When this transcendence is the transcendence of *love*, it also experiences this term as the *holy* mystery."²⁵ Thus according to Rahner the luminosity that is always implicitly shed on reality in human knowledge of reality is an absolute, holy mystery, without which human knowledge cannot be properly understood and which makes that knowledge a loving orientation to the world. Hence when people look for evidence of reality in their knowledge this always entails self-evidence. In Rahner's view knowledge always entails mystery as a horizon with which we are partly familiar, or which makes us anxious or bored. In knowing reality one touches one's spiritual depths. According to him one can also see it as a thorn in one's flesh and as something that thwarts one's desire to control. "But only when one begins to ask about asking itself, and to think about thinking itself, only when one turns one's attention to the scope of knowledge and not only to the objects of knowledge, to transcendence and not only to what is understood categorically in time and space within this transcendence, only then is one just on the threshold of becoming a religious person."²⁶

²⁴ Rahner, K. (1999), *Foundations of Christian faith. An introduction to the idea of Christianity* (translation of *Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, Freiburg: Herder 1976), New York: Crossroad, 21.

²⁵ Id.

²⁶ Op. cit., 22-23.

To Rahner performance of faith necessarily has a dimension of self-knowledge. And since that knowledge is inconceivable without its structural attribute of transcendental experience, its certainty is not in the nature of subordination to a heteronymous object of knowledge. If we know God, that knowledge has the character of a silently present horizon of self-evidence in our freedom that generates a loving orientation to categorical reality in space and time.

Rahner explains that the event of God's self-communication is a free *offer*. He refers to it as "the abiding presence as mystery". Humans are free to accept or refuse it. God's self-communication is an ever present, silent, and implicit horizon of the relation to oneself that is present in human knowledge. The offer may be refused, and even then one relates freely to oneself. The free event of God's self-communication is not the coercive presence of a categorical situation, as when one meets someone who presents one with a choice which one can either accept or refuse. The free event is present *in* all human choices and *in* all relations with situations in human reality. It is present as a gift that makes possible and gives birth to an autonomous, freely made human decision. This is how Rahner proposes linking the transcendental experience *in* human freedom with God's self-communication. "In the one and only concrete, real order of human existence, what is most intrinsic to man is God's self-communication, at least as an offer, and as given prior to man's freedom as the condition of its highest and obligatory actualisation."²⁷

The free event of God's self-communication, according to Rahner's theory, is present to the extent that free, autonomous people are present to themselves. It is not the object of some individual, categorical human experience acquired a posteriori alongside other objects of experiences. In Rahner's theory of Christianity the free event of God's self-communication is a modality of humans' original, non-thematic relationship with themselves, hence a modality of transcendental experience. It is silently present, hidden and, as such, can also be ignored. Therefore, the event of God's self-communication is a reality that cannot be made conscious any more than transcendental experience can be made reflexive. In almost mystical terms Rahner writes about the event of God's self-communication as a dynamism in human cognition, in which orientation to a goal of our knowledge coincides with the power of the dynamism. "We can describe the transcendental experience of God's self-communication in grace, or, to put it differently, the dynamism and the finalization of the spirit as

²⁷ Op. cit., 124.

knowledge and love towards the immediacy of God, [as a] dynamism ... of such a kind that, because of God's self-communication, the goal itself is also the very power of the movement (we usually call this movement grace)...²⁸.

Because I understand theological science as a thinking towards God, I see it as the task of theology to thematize the non-thematic, silent horizon of our existence. This theology does that by exploring the horizons of human existence. In this book, the semantics of modern societies is at issue.

Here it seems appropriate to address a widespread misunderstanding concerning theology. Many reproach theology that it confines itself to religious truths, and that therefore, from the outset, it cannot be critical or open to criticism. The faithful – thinks many – see their expressive equilibrium expressed in religious truths, in an extra series of cognitions, at a remove from the everyday reality of knowledge and action. But in line with many contemporary theologians, including Rahner and Schoonenberg, religious truths such as they appear in a Credo (“I believe in God, the Father Almighty...”) are first and foremost confessions through which a religious community expresses fundamental aspects of its commitment and religious praxis. Such aspects of the Credo are also expressed in a long and varied history of reflection on reality - in this example, of thinking of reality as creation and divine providence. Approaching reality as the creation and divine providence is an example of the expressive centre of Christian faith. And should any form of theology of creation or another be formulated from it, such a theology would be intellectually and socio-historically plausible within the culture in which the theologian lives. That happens because theology explores the horizons of human existence. Talking of a creation and divine providence is then not the formulation of a separate cognition, but rather the expression of a reflexive equilibrium which in our time and culture is related to the semantics of modern societies. In this way the expressive equilibrium of theology becomes critical. “Creation and divine providence” is understood as thematizing a silent horizon of existence. That is the nature of theology's truth claim in a time of reflexive modernity.

In section 1.1. three themes defining the semantics of modern societies were identified. It transpired that the third theme represented a summation of all three. In the public domain personal, free notions regarding and discursive validation of what we do and want in our societies appear, and

²⁸ Op. cit., 130.

are complexly related and contrasting. Public theology investigates these personal notions and their discursive validation by paying attention to new forms of agency, changing lifestyles and shifting social structures, it transpired in section 1.2. And this investigation is theological – takes place within the faculty of theology – because these forms of agency, these lifestyles and structures are approached by theology as possible horizons of human existence in which the non-thematic silent horizon of our reality could be that of creation and divine providence. The theologian tries to shed a new light on such horizons, by making explicit the suspicion that God may after all exist, introducing a critical perspective on such horizons, whereby human existence may acquire an unsuspected profundity²⁹.

1.3. Concerning a canon of research in public theology

In section 1.1. reference was made to a list of fields which constitute the subject of research in public theology. At the same time, attention was given to the question from which perspective research in these fields may be termed theological. Both issues concern the question whether a canon of research in public theology could be defined - a list of themes which – ideally and actually – forms part the research. That is the topic of this section. Hence its title: on a canon of research in public theology.

The word canon could be applied to refer to an authorised list. It is often used in that way in Bible studies. One talks of the canons of the Old and New Testaments. These lists of sacred books were compiled based on decisions taken by the recognized authorities of religious communities. Something similar exists in the history of dogmatic theology. Through the agency and influence of - for instance - Thomas Aquinas and Calvin, canons of themes and doctrines were established which guide research in dogmatic theology. But here we are dealing with a different kind of authorisation than that which established the Bible. The biblical canon was established in the name of a doctrinal authority authorized by religious communities. Theological canons are established in the name of very influential theological traditions.

In a young tradition's exercise of systematic theology, could one actually speak of a canon? And is this really necessary? After all, there is no connection here to either of the abovementioned complexes of meaning

²⁹ Cf. Gisel, P. (1981), Nietzsche's Perspectivism and Theological Language, in: *Concilium*, Vol. 17/5, 81-88