The Need for a Modernization of Consciousness; for a self-critical Critique of Rationality and of Religion

Gunnar Skirbekk

University of Bergen

The plurality of religions and comprehensive doctrines, combined with modern weaponry and pre-modern mentalities, leads to the question: is it possible to justify basic norms that are universally valid across religious doctrines and cultural traditions, in order to avoid a fatal "struggle between gods"? If so, there is a need for a modernization of consciousness that includes a self-critical critique of scientific rationality as well as a critique of religion. In this paper an affirmative answer is sought by a blend of transcendental pragmatics and conceptual analysis.

Key terms include reflective and discursive rationality, arguments from absurdity, act-inherent ("tacit") knowing, as well as self-referential reconstruction and creative redescription.

I. Background

I have been interested in religion and theology for quite some time, as indicated already in my first book (Skirbekk 1958). At that time I reacted against cases of rude criticism of religion, such as the kind of criticism that flourished by a blend of literary rhetoric and outdated positivism.[1] At the same time I was strongly disturbed by the problem of evil, in reality as well as in theology.

Today we experience a renewed interest in religion. But simultaneously there is often an interconnection between religion and politics. We see it, e.g., in Israel, in the US and in the Middle East – from all three monotheistic religions. And this interconnection between religion and politics manifests itself together with a distinctive development and proliferation of advanced military technologies, applicable both for massive war operations and for elaborate terrorist assaults.

To the extent that the renewed interest in religion appears together with pre-modern attitudes, either those of unenlightened fundamentalists or of disorderly dreamers, we have thereby arrived at a fatal tension between modern means of destruction and a pre-modern attitude – a constellation structurally similar to the one

we experienced under fascism in between the two world wars. This is a reason for serious concern.[2]

At the same time there is a danger that recent patterns of immigration may lead to "parallel societies" in Western countries, along religious and ethnic lines, and maybe also along economic and social lines, including cultural and educational ones. Under such conditions many things may happen. Hence such trends give a reason for serious concern.

And the answer? That might certainly be multifarious. But in this connection we shall focus on the need for cultural efforts in terms of a "critique of religion" [3] (in the spirit of Kant) and a "modernization of consciousness"[4], including a reflexive "critique of science" (*Wissenschaftskritik*).

"Critique of religion" and "modernization of consciousness", these terms are far from being clear and evident. I shall therefore add a few remarks as a preliminary clarification:

The revitalization of religion in our time includes a variety of religions and religious views. But this pluralism[5] contains a danger for conflict between different beliefs and doctrines, in an age when religious, political and technological factors interact in a problematic manner.

There are certainly many approaches that may and should be considered in order to reduce this potential for conflict. Quite a few are related to economic and social conditions. And many are related to cultural ones. But in addition there is a need for institutional differentiations that warrant religious and ideological neutrality for the legal system. Simultaneously this requires a cultural modernization, e.g., by learning-processes where everyone realizes and recognizes that there are other beliefs and doctrines than one's own and that the question of what is universally valid can only be settled by critical discussions of that which various scientific and scholarly disciplines and various life experiences have brought forward. These are the learning-processes that characterize a modernization of consciousness (including a self-critical critique of sciences and the humanities) and thereby also a critique of religion, not as a rejection, but as an epistemic purification.[6]

In short, the aim of this paper is defensive and preventative: to support the attempt to avoid and relieve conflicts of a negative nature. In this paper I shall not consider what religion in various ways may yield in *positive* terms – both generally and in modern societies in particular. In that case I would for instance have focused on the question as to what a religious language might yield, not least for the experience of the vulnerability and ephemerality of all life: do we need a religious language in order to grasp and communicate a basic awe for life – do we dare say, an awe for vulnerable life as sacred?[7]

But these questions will be left aside in this paper. Here we shall look at challenges and dangers related to the role of religion in modern societies and what we possibly can do in that regard.

As a preliminary remark I would emphasize that the primary focus of this paper is the question of *normative justification*, not the question of *practical implementation*. The basic question of procedural norms for discursive reasoning is the core issue. I refrain from speculating on the various concrete answers that might appear in this connection, regarding preferable adjustments between religion and modern societies for the different beliefs and comprehensive doctrines – it is not a philosopher's task to overrule these discussions between the parties concerned. On the other hand, nor can the various beliefs and comprehensive doctrines avoid the *general* challenges inherent in the interplay between a self-critical critique of the sciences and a similar critique of religion and thus inherent in the self-reflexive recognition of the fact that there also are other beliefs and comprehensive doctrines that have been (or can be) "modernized" in this way. Thereby there are also important institutional differentiations and arrangements that have to be implemented.

In this sense the issue of the normative justification of basic norms and discursive reasoning does have clear and powerful implications of a practical kind, even if the concrete implementations have to be discussed and adjusted by those concerned in the various cases.

II. New Challenges

The question of religion and modernity is an urgent theme due to the revitalization of religion in modern societies – changes that came as a surprise to many people. In short, we may say the following:

A generation ago there was (at least in my country) a widespread skepticism toward religion. It was widely assumed that religion was going to play a marginal role in modern societies. But simultaneously it was widely believed that religion represents a normative justification for morality, a justification that neither the sciences nor a positivistic world-view were able to provide – nor could a decisionistic existentialism. In addition religion was widely conceived as a protection against bestiality.

Today the situation is changed. Intellectually, the negative criticism of religion has calmed down; socially and politically, religion plays an important role, not least in the US and in the Muslim world. We are witnessing a renaissance of religion, also in modern societies.

But at the same time this revitalization of religion signals new challenges for the religious and non-religious alike:

(i) Today religion manifests itself as a *plurality* of religions, as an unavoidable plurality, both for *intellectual reasons*[8] and because of *political causes*.[9] Therefore, religious (and non-religious) persons have to learn how to relate themselves to persons with other religious convictions and ideals; pluralism requires *reflectivity* related to one's own faith.[10]

(ii) Due to this pluralism it has furthermore become *difficult* to think of religion as a secure basis for the *normative justification of morality*: Religion no longer appears as merely one specific religion, but as a diversity of beliefs and convictions. Thus the idea of a religious justification of morality has become problematic.

(iii) There is now, on the contrary, an urgent need for a justification of *context-transcending norms* that are able to regulate the relationship between the different religions and world-views, in order to avoid destructive conflicts between them.

(iv) Moreover, the renaissance of religion often takes the shape of an interconnection between *politics and religion*, often as fundamentalism, both in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Thus the problem of conflict becomes even more serious, and the need for context-transcending norms and institutional arrangements that may contribute to the regulation and reduction of such conflicts increases correspondingly.

(v) This becomes particularly urgent when religion is used to legitimate indoctrinating and suppressing systems as well as morally dubious warfare or terrorism. The idea of religion as a *defense against bestiality* has become less credible than it used to be.

(vi) Demographic trends towards *parallel societies* additionally accentuate this need for conflict-regulating and conflict-reducing efforts in terms of modernization of consciousness and critique of religion.

III. "Religion"

So much for the new challenges. Now a terminological remark: the term "religion" is highly ambiguous. There are not only the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) with their different versions and sects, but also various forms of new religions from New Age and Scientology to Satanism,[11] in addition to different versions of traditional religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, and also various kinds of folk religions, with witches and magic.[12] This is truly a multitude, and one that in large part reflects conflicting conceptions and evaluations. If we take them at their words, all the different agents and movements that present themselves as religious, there would hardly be any basis for the claim that they agree on "what is essential". In short, religion resembles philosophy in the sense that not all versions are "kind and positive", nor do they all "say the same".

Moreover, how and by what right could we delimit the concept of religion and thus decide who should have the right to conceive of oneself as religious? Surely, we always operate with some concept or another of religion, or rather with several concepts, dependent on the context and what we would like to focus on. And that is the point. There is not just one concept that presents itself (as it were) and on which everyone agrees. So either we operate with a wide notion, but one that contains extensive tensions and oppositions, or we operate with a narrow notion, e.g. one that just embraces those conceptions that we conceive as good and positive, but then we exclude quite a few, and we shall have to justify our peculiar normative delimitation.[13]

The *pluralism* of "comprehensive doctrines"[14] in modern societies includes a multitude of religions,[15] both as a social fact and as the recognition that religion, conceived in an enlightened manner, cannot be refuted or rejected by conclusive arguments. But there are many beliefs and convictions that in our times are presented as religion, and not all of them would withstand the light of day. There is superstition and nonsense, now as before; and there are persons and movements that are out of their minds.

Hence we are faced with a double challenge, on the general level: We are faced with the need for (i) a modernization of consciousness which implies a consolidation of those kinds of religion and religiousness that comply with critical modern claims, and an epistemic transformation of the other ones; and (ii) context-transcending norms that justify an institutional differentiation and that thus prepare for a peaceful coexistence among the different "reasonable" (epistemically modernized) religions.

In practice these two efforts will tend to coincide (at the same time as there certainly are many other things that also have to be taken care of[16]); and both are dependent on a universal rationality that can justify such a modernization, including basic context-transcending norms. Is there such a universal standard of rationality, given that modern societies are at the same time science-based and pluralistic?

This is an extensive and subtle question that I have discussed more thoroughly in other connections. Briefly stated, in the last instance my answer is affirmative; despite all the counter arguments there is a core of common, mandatory reason for those of us living in modern societies. Here I can only give a hint as to how I claim to reach such an answer. However, assuming that this answer stands firm I shall sketch two main approaches that (among other things) may serve to temper the potential for destructive conflict related to religion in modern societies. We have the question as to how we can *justify context-transcending norms* and we have the question as to how *modernization of consciousness* (and *critique of religion*) could and should be conceived. We shall first look at the question of context-transcending norms and how they can be justified, and then at the question of modernization of consciousness and critique of religion.

IV. Context-transcending norms?

Hence, we have two questions: Is it possible to justify some basic context-transcending, universal norms? And if so, how are we to implement them? Practically minded people would immediately turn to the latter question. But without an answer to the former question we have nothing to implement. Do we have an answer to the first question? I shall first briefly recall some of the problems we run into once we want to justify context-transcending and universally valid norms:

(i) We cannot infer from "is" to "ought". The normative cannot be read out of the *empirical* alone.

(ii) Our various activities are normatively based, but how should we proceed in order to extract context-transcending and universally valid norms from one or several of our activities? There are *different* contexts for our activities; for instance, on a macro level we have not only liberal Western democracy, but also China and India, and we have had the Third Reich and the Taliban regime of Afghanistan. Hence we have the problem of *contextualism*.

(iii) We might accept contextualism, and add that we have to *evaluate the consequences* of various events in different contexts. But by what normative standard do we carry out these evaluations? How do we proceed to justify a certain standard as universally valid? So far we are *begging the question*.

(iv) If we then simply answer that we have *decided* that a certain standard should be regarded as valid – the way we may proceed within political and legal institutions – such a decision *won't do* as an answer to the question for context-transcending and universally valid norms: If the final appeal is simply a matter of decision, of decisionism, we may decide for anything whatsoever.

(v) We might look for *actual (empirical) coincidences* concerning norms and values in different religions. But firstly, (i) in order to find common norms and values by this procedure, we should consider *all* religions, a problematic project since the term is notoriously ambiguous. On the other hand, if we begin with a certain selection of religions the answer is biased already at the outset. (ii) However, we may safely predict that there will not be an extensive coincidence in normative matters for instance among Quakers on the one side and Satanists on the other (just as there is none among Nietzscheans on the one hand and Platonists on the other). And finally, (iii) an empirical demonstration of an actual coincidence in normative matters among various groups is *different* from

a *normative* justification of certain context-transcending norms as universally valid and mandatory.

(vi) Since an empirical procedure won't do, we may turn to *metaphysics*. But here, too, we are faced with a problem of pluralism: There are *different* metaphysical doctrines; already the attempt to compare them is problematic. Moreover, if metaphysics is conceived of as a linguistically articulated total view it is natural to ask for a justification of the axioms upon which the system is built; then we get well known skeptical objections: The attempt of a deductive justification ends in a *trilemma* of circle, decisionism or infinite regression. Thereby the metaphysical ambition turns into *philosophical skepticism*.

Hence the attempt at finding an answer to our first question – of a justification of context-transcending and universally valid norms – ends in *doubt and skepticism*. We are faced with what used to be called European nihilism: there are no universally valid norms that can regulate the struggle between different world-views; no such context-transcending norms can be justified as universally valid and obligatory. This gloomy scenario is what Max Weber described as a struggle between gods.

Thereby the *renaissance of religion*, with the *fact of pluralism*, has led us away from an ignorant innocence, for instance the conviction that an Anglo-American version of Protestantism without further ado could serve as a universally valid normative foundation – or a Catholic version, or a Muslim version, etc. We are forced to raise basic questions, *to reflect and argue*.

The renaissance of religion, sure – but is religion the answer, or the problem?

Civilization and its discontents, Freud said. So it is. And this discontent should not be disregarded, nor can it be permanently ignored: In a conflict-engraved modern world we shall encounter these challenges at the next crossroad. So let us face the question: How could we overcome this basic skepticism? Is it possible? If so, how?

V. A possible answer: cultural modernization

So far I have acted as the devil's advocate. But if we believe Dante, then the road that leads toward the underworld may at the end turn upward! Hence we may talk in these terms: We may turn our attention from focusing on texts to

focusing on *speech acts* (from the semantic to the pragmatic), i.e., to language in use. When we discuss, and doubt, we are necessarily within a discussion. The person who argumentatively discusses the challenges of skepticism is unavoidably a participant in a discussion. So then the question: do we have to presuppose some unavoidable and binding norms for discursive activities? Here we do not ask for empirical (contingent) conditions, but for constitutive conditions. And we ask for constitutive (necessary) conditions that are simultaneously normative: *constitutive presuppositions* that have the status of *norms*, norms for an activity in which we, as doubting and discussing beings, necessarily take part.[17]

The way of proceeding is not empirical, but reflective, characterized by the demand to avoid performative self-contradiction, to avoid self-referential inconsistency. How?

Briefly, I'll express it in this way: By the use of so-called *arguments from absurdity* we proceed by breaking or violating some precondition for meaning in a certain context, and thus we evoke some kind of meaninglessness, that is, something "absurd" and not only an actual mistake (an empirical untruth) or a logical mistake (a contradiction on the semantic level). The next step is that of reflecting on what the broken or violated precondition might be and how it can be formulated.

When our starting point is a discussion, a basic precondition for meaning is the norm that we have to respect good reasons and listen to what the other participants want to say. Bluntly stated, a person can only claim to have a sound and reasonable view in a given case if he or she has encountered relevant counter-arguments;[18] hence one has to seek better arguments and one has to recognize other participants as both reasonable and fallible, like oneself.

This might be called "transcendental argumentation", or rather "transcendental-pragmatic argumentation", in order to indicate the difference from Kant.[19]

Here, as in philosophy in general, there are many problems and challenges. Briefly stated, my approach is that of an attempt to combine the strength of the philosophy of reflection (Apel and Habermas) with the argumentative virtues of analytic philosophy (late Wittgenstein). This implies that I go in for a way of working philosophically that includes example-based thought-experiments.[20]

The philosophical point behind this way of working is a skepticism concerning a way of working that operates with conceptual distinctions on a high level of abstraction, related to different philosophical positions, without being sufficiently sensitive for the plurality and nuances in the way we use our concepts in various contexts, both in philosophy and in daily life.

What I am now saying is not philosophically "impartial" since I hereby take part in the reflexive discussions on discursive preconditions.[21] But I do think that I have some valid points, due to what can be shown by such example-based thought-experiments.[22] However, these points have to be shown by discussing various example-oriented arguments, and that cannot be done convincingly within a paper of this scope. Hence I shall simply restrict myself to refer to the claim that within a serious discussion we necessarily presuppose the universal validity of the discursive norms for *seeking better reasons* and for *recognizing other persons as co-discussants*, and thereby of normative notions such as freedom of expression and personal autonomy (see below).

Moreover, as I see it[23] this entails an extension of the truth problem:[24] The problem of truth is not merely related to the discussion of theoretical and moral claims of validity, stated in propositions, aiming at a justification by referring to the better arguments – there is more to it:

(i) The truth problem is also related to various forms of *act-inherent certainty*, or so-called *tacit knowing*, that occasionally are beyond reasonable doubt (cf. Wittgenstein, Polanyi, and Heidegger).[25]

(ii) Moreover, we have a peculiar truth problem for comprehensive theories, including philosophical ones, where the question concerning *conceptual adequacy* merges with the *validity question* of *statements* and of *norms*.[26]

Nevertheless, justification (by discussion) of validity claims remains crucial; this does not merely go for *singular statements* (with the question of truth), but also for basic *normative claims* (with the question whether they can be said to be universally valid and binding), and even for the question whether some set of *concepts* are *appropriate* in a certain case, preferably in a negative and comparative version: are they less inadequate than some other concepts in this

context? The two latter questions (concerning normative validity and conceptual adequacy) are connected in an interesting way, as we shall see.

There is an important question in this connection, namely, whether it is it possible to find, that is, to justify, universally valid norms that may contribute in regulating and reducing conflicts between world-views. I shall briefly point at affirmative answers, on three levels:

(i) Firstly, we have *constitutive norms for serious discussions*, either in academic contexts or in the public sphere. The procedure consists in arguments from absurdity of a strictly self-reflective kind, pointing at norms that we have to accept in order to participate in a serious discussion (such as respect for good reasons and recognition of other participants). Negatively stated, certain kinds of irrationalism and ethnocentrism are excluded. These norms have the epistemic status of unavoidable preconditions for serious discussion. And discussion is an activity in which we participate when we discuss these issues, just as it is an activity embedded in quite a few of the basic institutions in modern societies, such as research, but also as a precondition for an open and enlightened public debate which again is a precondition for a meaningful democracy.

(ii) Secondly, the choice of *concepts* predetermines the question as to which norms and values we may see. For instance, the person who sees the world with economic concepts sees economic values, the person who sees the world with sociological concepts sees social values, etc. Hence, the struggle surrounding language (of what conceptual perspective to apply) is morally relevant. But since we in many cases can discuss questions of relative conceptual adequacy (and inadequacy), and since values and norms are conceptually embedded, it is also possible to discuss the corresponding moral questions argumentatively.

(iii) Thirdly, those who are concerned about the normative issue under discussion may discuss the question with each other and learn from each other by trying to see the issue as the others see it, and under favorable conditions it might happen that they end up with a view that all of them find reasonable once everybody has had a say and all positions and arguments have been seriously discussed. What they have come up with may then be seen as a *valid answer*. Thereby we approach the discourse-theoretical conception of normative validity. This is a view of normative justification and validity that has its strength. But it is also *a problematic view*. As we know, there are often asymmetrical relations of power (and powerlessness) of various kinds. Hence one has to add the demand that such discussions should take place under ideal conditions. Only then can consent be a warrant for validity. But then we have a tension between ideal demands and the real conditions in each case. For instance, we have the problem that not everyone concerned is able to participate. This is not merely true for all those who cannot take part in such discussions for practical reasons, but also for all the so-called "hard cases" in bio-medical ethics, from fetuses and the newly born to those with severe dementia – and for future generations as well, and for all concerned who are not biologically human beings.[27]

Furthermore, as we know, normative questions come in many varieties. Some norms and values are related to specific institutions and activities. They are essentially contextual. For instance, normative facts like "corner" in football or "checkmate" in chess only exist in these games (and not in cricket or ludo). Discourse theory explicitly emphasizes that many normative questions are contextual; indeed, value questions are mainly seen as culture dependent. Only certain basic norms can be justified as universally valid, according to discourse theory. They are primarily *procedural* norms, norms for how to proceed. They are context-transcending norms that are justified "from below" (as necessary preconditions for ongoing activities); they are not postulated "universal principles" as in rationalistic metaphysics. But these procedural norms, justified from the "bottom up" (from praxis), are exactly the kinds of norms that we are looking for, norms that could regulate and reduce destructive conflicts between different religious and non-religious world-views and social institutions.

Moreover, in this connection the question is only whether such norms can be justified. If we have an affirmative answer to this question, we are confronted with the next question, concerning implementation: How can we get the agents, ourselves included, to follow these context-transcending norms? Faced with this practical question, philosophy might contribute somewhat, but merely in collaboration with others, including the various agents themselves.

To state the point bluntly, philosophy may for instance contribute with insights from the philosophy of the sciences and the humanities – e.g., in terms of the reminder that all scientific work is perspectival, with the implication that there is always a danger that a specific perspective, specific concepts and thereby specific values, may get an unreasonable dominance in society; or the reminder that research is fallible and insecure, in various ways; or the reminder that more or less hidden forces—economic interests or political interventions, or private ambition for honor and money, or ideological narrowness (possibly with the very best moral intention)–may have an impact on researchers and scholars and thereby influence their claims. Criticism of the sciences, *Fachkritik*, is therefore a highly needed activity; scientific and scholarly research should ideally be self-correcting, like an "organized skepticism".[28] Finally, it is also relevant that we do have insight and knowledge as agents and co-agents in the

life-world – not all that is knowledge and wisdom is dependent on specialized research.

Philosophy may also contribute with insight into basic preconditions for some essential aspects of modern societies. (i) This is for instance true for the reflective argument that *freedom of expression* is a necessary, constitutive precondition for the search for truth and for an enlightened formation of opinion, and thereby for personal autonomy and for a meaningful democratic system. Freedom of expression is not merely a contingent "Western Value", something people in the West "believe in" and which other civilized people are free to choose or to reject.[29] (ii) This is furthermore true for the reflective argument that *personal autonomy* is not a given fact, but a never ending project for each individual and for society, and hence that autonomy can be undermined by objectifying attitudes and practices, for instance in the institution of social welfare, or by misplaced kindness that stamp perceived "weak groups" as powerless victims and thereby reduce their human dignity as responsible and autonomous persons.[30] True, the question of personal autonomy is complex and precarious, but it won't do without a mutual recognition whereby we make claims to each other and keep each other responsible for what we are doing.[31]

In short, the contribution of philosophy often relates to the discussion and clarification of *crucial concepts*, done in collaboration with other agents, for instance in pointing at the dangers of the dominance of instrumental rationality or of the sacrifice of discursive and interpretive rationality. Another example is the discussion of the relationship between convincing with the use of good arguments and persuading with rhetorical means alone.[32] Generally speaking, much of what is said in this essay can be summarized as discussions and clarifications of crucial concepts that we use or ought to use.

VI. Redescriptions and Reconstructions

All of what we have said is relevant for our main question of *religion and modernity*, as to how we should best understand what it means and which challenges it entails. The problem of normative justification is certainly important in this connection, and so are the question of scientific and scholarly

reason (and unreason) and the question as to which concepts are more adequate or infelicitous. Two remarks to the latter point:

We are not merely confronted with the epistemic task of discussing what concepts are comparatively more or less adequate, among the concepts in use; there is also an urge for *new and better concepts*. This innovative task is often called redescription,[33] and it requires creative ambition. Hence this endeavor may require non-scholarly literary genres. Nevertheless, these redescriptions should also be examined retrospectively and critically.[34]

Similarly, there is a need for "bringing experiences on concepts" (to talk in the Hegelian tongue), i.e., for finding words for important events and experiences so that we may better understand what has happened and what has contributed to the formation of ourselves and others. The task is that of *appropriating*, reflectively and critically, *former learning-processes.*[35] For instance, when talking about "religion and modernity" it is important to keep in mind what concept of modernity we are using (e.g. when we talk about a modernization of consciousness). Therefore, let it be said that in this essay we stick to the reconstructive notion of modernity and processes of modernization.[36]

VII. Religion in modern societies?

These remarks bring us back to the challenges related to the renaissance of religion in modern societies. There are different world-views, religious and non-religious. That they exist is a fact, but not all of them exist rightfully (i.e., as epistemically acceptable). The main challenge is thus the following: in a complex modern world, with an abundance of advanced weaponry and other means of destruction, how could we avoid a fatal "struggle between gods"?

Our point of departure was a crucial question: are there universally valid normative grounds for a peaceful co-existence? Is it possible to justify context-transcending and universally binding norms? I have indicated an affirmative answer. However, I have not gone into the question of implementation, nor shall I do so in this essay.[37] But I shall point out some implications in this regard, implications of what I have said so far. This I shall do in relation to recent debates. In this connection I operate with three premises:

(i) The fact of pluralism

(ii) Everyone would rather live

(iii) Modernization of consciousness

(i) I assume that there is a plurality of world-views and that it is not to be avoided, either politically or intellectually.[38]

(ii) It is a widely accepted premise that people prefer to live rather than die,[39] at the same time as we are all vulnerable and mortal. [40]

(iii) There is a persistent need for a modernization of consciousness; this goes for everyone, for religious persons of various sorts as well as for the non-religious of various kinds.

VIII. Modernization of consciousness

In accordance with Habermas I conceive the need for a modernization of consciousness in the following way, without restricting it to religious consciousness:[41]

(1) We have to *recognize scientific and scholarly knowledge*, in accordance with the critical and self-correcting conception of the sciences as *organized skepticism*, and thereby we have to appropriate a *discursive and reflective attitude*, to the effect that we are open to seeking and accepting better arguments and for recognizing others as equal participants.[42]

(2) Everyone has to realize that one's own faith is *one among several*, and that one cannot know in a scientific or scholarly sense that one has the right faith (see the point above). We have to acquire *a reflective identity*.

(3) We have to realize that *valid reasons*, in legislation and in the court, must in principle be understandable *for all citizens*, independently of faith and world-view. Decisive political reasons must in this sense be neutral in relation to any specific religion or world-view. Thereby we must accept an *institutional distinction* between religion and the judicial system.

The third point implies that all kinds of views can be presented for public debate, but finally they have to be "sluiced" into the political system, to end up in judicial decisions that are binding for all citizens; thereby it is required that all decisive reasons are in principle understandable for everybody.

The first demand refers to the interrelationship between a critique of religion and a critique of the sciences. At this point it is important to realize that there exists such a self-critical critique of scientific rationality, in contrast to scientist dogmatism as well as in contrast to postmodernist relativism.

When applied in concrete contexts these three demands (1-3 above) have to be adjusted to each individual in a reasonable and flexible way. However, it is decisive that the various leaders take these challenges seriously and that they have gone through the corresponding learning-processes, to the effect that the general culture is sufficiently influenced by such a modernization.

But then, isn't there an asymmetry embedded in these requirements? Yes, in a sense. These demands are far easier to handle for a university educated Muslim in Karachi than for a peasant's wife in upper Pakistan. They are easier to face for an educated Chinese in the urban area than for an uneducated Chinese in the countryside. Such asymmetries exist, and they have to be taken into consideration when it comes to the question of how these requirements should be presented for different persons in different contexts.

This being said it is worth recalling that these three demands are "old news" in many countries where we have had extensive theological and philosophical discussions, for instance with regard to religion based on Holy Scriptures with inherent truth-claims, such as the claim that God is our creator and our judge, basic validity-claims that in various ways are embedded in the three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

(i) All monotheistic religions, with one God who has created everything, human beings included, and who passes judgment and punishes, possibly for eternity, all such religions must give a theological answer to *the problem of evil*.[43] When God is said to be good and almighty, just and omniscient, the problem becomes acute. When God is seen as harsh and condemning the problem gets worse. From the Book of Job, to the great theologians (like Augustine and Thomas), up to modern times (e.g. Leibniz and Voltaire), and to theologians after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, we may follow this debate on the problem of evil. At the outset this is a discussion for the few; yet it does make a difference for all religious

persons whether or not the religious and cultural leaders of a society have gone through such learning-processes.

(ii) All religions based on Holy Scriptures have to face the question of *textual interpretation*, both linguistically and historically. In short, this is a main task of theology as a scholarly discipline.[44] Again, it does make a difference for all religious persons whether or not the religious and cultural leaders of a society have gone through such learning-processes.

(iii) Finally, all religions that make the claim of saying something true about what is right or wrong have to relate themselves to various scientific and scholarly disciplines that have something to say about that which these religions are talking about or take for granted.[45] Moreover, such religions have to *relate to scientific and scholarly ways of working* that (ideally and ultimately) entail argumentative and self-critical procedures. At this point there are extensive and exciting discussions between theologians and other scholars, discussions that have been going on for centuries. And again it does make a difference for all religious persons whether or not the religious and cultural leaders of a society have gone through such learning-processes.

IX. **The need for a critique of religion**

But not all religious leaders and traditions have gone through such learning-processes. This is indeed the problem with fundamentalism and with various forms of religious reverie and zealotry that are going wild, the traditional ones as well as those that have risen recently, be it in the US, in Israel, or in Iran and Saudi-Arabia. Therefore the task of a modernization of consciousness is not a project that is brought to its end,[46] but a current and urgent task.

However, it might be the case that those who are not modernized in this sense could show greater social and political strength than those who are: a stern and commanding god, a literal reading of the scriptures without any doubt, a praying and preaching that is not moderated by critical self-reflection and "organized skepticism", this might pay off, politically, in the short run. In short, the result is socio-political strength and intellectual weakness. For modern religious persons

there might thus be a fascination and temptation, such as in the mobilizing force of fundamentalist faith and practice, both socially and politically. It might be tempting to put aside all the serious and difficult theological questions as well as the requirement of a modernization of consciousness, and instead be "practical" and fraternize with the fundamentalists. But if we turn away from the demand of an intellectual modernization there is a danger of loosing precisely that which makes us strong and robust in a culturally modern society.

A progressive and offensive strategy would on the contrary consist in presenting a self-critical critique of religion to the fundamentalists and fanatics, be they Jewish, Christian, or Muslim – critique in a Kantian sense,[47] whereby critique does not mean a negative rejection, but an intellectually purified appropriation.

Due to immigration and demographic trends it is important to promote such modernizing learning-processes within traditionalist Muslim communities, but it is also important with regard to similar trends in Christian and Jewish communities. This should be done by open and enlightened discussions in the public sphere. In addition there are various institutional initiatives that could be taken, for instance the introduction of pedagogically adjusted curricula inspired by a modernization of consciousness (as mentioned above) in all elementary schools. Preferably, a critical critique of religion should play a crucial role in any educational system – again, flexibly adjusted to the different levels and individuals. The education of teachers should be transformed accordingly.[48]

In short, a counter-case: in the US "freedom of religion" is widely (and wrongly) conceived as a freedom from criticism, not as a freedom to criticize; and consequently, due to curious biblical ideas, a decisive proportion of the electorate supports the current Israeli governments and their self-destructive and detrimental policy.[49] This tragic situation illustrates the urgent overall need for an enlightened critique of religion, to the long-term benefit of everyone. Without such efforts, without an active and critical critique of religion, we may envisage an ongoing and unredeemed tension between religion and modernity, in a crowded global world with plenty of modern weaponry and other means of mass destruction, a tension that might hardened due to ecological and demographic challenges and regional and socio-cultural tensions.

The “modern project”, rightly understood, does not entail any promise of happiness on Earth. On the contrary, modern societies are characterized by tensions and uncertainty and deep challenges, for instance of an environmental nature. But once we have eaten from the tree of knowledge there is no return to a pre-modern paradise. Hence, we have to make the best out of it, and basically there is no other road to follow than the one that is characterized by self-critical modernity, sensitive for vulnerable creatures, persons and institutions and open for improvements step-by-step, a third road between petrified fundamentalism and relativist contextualism. Anything else seems to be less desirable and less realistic in the long run.

[1] Cf literary polemics like Arnulf Øverland (in Norway).
[2] Islamist extremism is a major case, from Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, but the same is true of religious-political extremism in Israel and in the U.S.; cf e.g. Mearsheimer and Walt 2006 on the operations of the Israel lobby in U.S. foreign policy.
[3] This essay can be read as a comment on an unclear point in Jürgen Habermas' paper "Religion in the Public Sphere"; cf "Religion in der Öffentlichkeit", in Habermas 2005, pp. 119-154.
[4] Term borrowed from Habermas, cf Habermas 2005, p. 146.
[5] Since it is often not a "reasonable" pluralism, cf e.g. Rawls (1996).
[6] Surely, we refer to relevant and reasonable criticism; there is plenty of "criticism" that does not meet that standard.
[7] Cf Skirbekk 2005, pp. 171-183.
[8] Especially referring to the argumentative overcoming of positivism.
[9] As a political fact, e.g. due to the immigration of Muslims to Western Europe.
[10] This is true not only for the encounter between different religious convictions, but also for the encounter between religious and non-religious convictions and world-views.
[11] There are various kinds of religious fundamentalism, but also neo-religious reveries and religious "privatization" (as in neo-charismatic movements).
[12] In modern societies, with various forms of science fiction in mass media, and with breath-taking technological developments and with subtle scientific theories that surpass common sense, there is a fertile ground for obscure pseudo-religious beliefs of a kind that would not survive when confronted with an open and enlightened criticism.
[13] Most people would probably conceive Hinduism and Buddhism as religions. But there are those who want to delimit the concept of religion to theistic and even to mono-theistic beliefs and doctrines. And what then about Taoism, or Confucianism? They have their temples and rituals, rules and visions, but are they religions? In China there are mixed opinions on these questions, and the same is true elsewhere. And what about the cult of the sun in the ancient Maya culture in Mexico? During ritual acts of human sacrifice the priests cut the heart out of the breast of those who were chosen, to mitigate the sun god. Was this a religion? Maybe. But for us, it is hardly a "kind religion".
[14] Rawlsian term.
[15] But also other comprehensive doctrines.
[16] Concerning political, economic, social, and cultural conditions.
[17] Here, and in the following; cf Skirbekk 2005 and 2007. See also Knut Erik Tranøy in Fjelland et al. (eds) (1997), "Norms of Inquiry: Methodologies as Normative Systems", pp. 93-103.
[18] Cf e.g. the classical passages in John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty*, ch. II): "There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradiction and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right."
[19] Cf e.g. "Truth and Justification" in Skirbekk 2006.
[20] In short, I claim to overcome basic problems in Apel on the one side and in Habermas on the other, e.g. by allowing for discursive meliorism (focusing on reflexive argumentation, not on consensus), see Skirbekk 2007, 2009, and (ed) 2004. Hence I disagree for instance with the criticism of the possibility of a universal pragmatic justification presented in Abdel-Nour 2004, based on a critique of the notion of consensus. Cf also the criticism of consensus by Wellmer e.g. in Skirbekk (ed) 2004.
[21] I do think that this example-oriented procedure, in interplay with the position-oriented procedure, may strengthen the philosophy of reflection (as in Apel and Habermas) against skeptical objections from analytically oriented philosophers of language. Moreover, I have also tried to show that this way of working is promising in many cases beyond the realm of strict self-reflection.
[22] For instance, the manifold within what is conceived as "meaningless" ("absurd"), and also the transitions from what is seen as meaningless to what is empirically false. Cf Skirbekk 1993 and 2007.
[23] Cf similar views in Wellmer 2004. Cf also the anthology Skirbekk (ed) 2004.
[24] Compare with standard views in Apel and Habermas.
[25] Cf e.g. Yu 2006.
[26] Thereby we face the question of "redescription" (Rorty) and creative "world disclosure" (Heidegger), but also the question of how this might be appropriated critically. See below.
[27] For the discussion of these cases, see e.g. Skirbekk 2007, pp. 53-76.
[28] Cf Merton 1968.
[29] Cf the quotation from John Stuart Mill (above). Also Skirbekk 1993 and 2007.
[30] As we did in Norway after the Second World War when the great poet and fascist Knut Hamsun was declared to have permanently weakened mental abilities.
[31] This point is clearly relevant for the discussion on immigration and integration, especially for persons from pre-modern societies.
[32] Between *Überzeugen* and *Überreden*.
[33] *Welterschließung* ("world disclosure") in German.

[34] However, it is not reasonable to assume that all concepts can be changed and renewed; there is a restriction in this regard as to basic aspects of our act-inherent insights related to our bio-bodily existence and also for basic aspects in our reflective insights into unavoidable preconditions for discursive speech-acts. Cf e.g. Skirbekk 1993 and 2005.
[35] What Habermas says about modernity can be read in this way; it is not an empirical theory of what is seen as objective processes, but reflective reconstructions of basic processes of modernization.
[36] Cf e.g. Skirbekk 2006, pp. 33-65.
[37] There is a division of labor between philosophers and scientists as well as between philosophers and politicians.
[38] But those who assume they might "take over the whole thing", or at least certain regions, cannot be expected to act according to this premise.
[39] Cf e.g. Thomas Hobbes on the desire to live (survive) as a basic premise for a political society.
[40] But those who assume that the words of god, or the only true doctrines, take priority over our miserable and earthly lives, cannot be expected to act according to this premise.
[41] Cf also Habermas 2005, p. 143 ff. (146).
[42] I refer to a constitutive (counter-factual) presupposition that participants in serious discussions are (sufficiently) serious and autonomous (reasonable as well as fallible and perspectival).
[43] Cf the discussion of the problem of evil in Skirbekk 1958.
[44] With the Reformation and the rise of different versions of Protestantism the question concerning the correct interpretation of the Holy Scriptures became an urgent one. Since Spinoza and the Enlightenment the demand for scholarly responsible linguistic and historical interpretations cannot be seriously denied.
[45] Cf the intricate relationship between personal freedom and causal and contextual factors, e.g. in matters of upbringing or in the court proceedings.
[46] Habermas 2005, p. 218: *eine Schlacht von gestern.*
[47] As in "Critique of Practical Reason".
[48] That goes for all those who teach or preach religion with public support, e.g. for Christian preachers, Jewish rabbis, and Islamic teachers.
[49] Taking these challenges into account I do not share the optimistic view (as in Roald [2008]) that technologically modern societies automatically move toward cultural modernity and discursive rationality. The US with its detrimental pro-Israeli policy, supported by numerous Christian fundamentalists, represents a tragic counter-example. Cf also e.g. Taner 2007.

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