Freed from religion?

by Samuel Sonderhoff

Today, the term "religion" seems to be loaded with very different, sometimes contradictory meanings in both modern scientific language and everyday language. Two tensions can be observed. First: On the one hand, religions such as Christianity or Judaism refer to a group of people who can be distinguished from those in a non-religious environment. On the other hand, systems theorists such as Niklas Luhmann view religion as a general social subsystem that performs the function of coping with contingency. Following this line of thought, one can search for religion in the spectacle of soccer stadiums or large music concerts. Second: F.D.E. Schleiermacher defined religion as a "feeling of absolute dependence" on a higher authority. In doing so, he made religion an inner, personal, intimate matter without intersubjective verifiability. On the contrary, we also describe people whose "outer" practices are strongly influenced by certain rules as being religious or pious. Religion usually takes on a pejorative meaning and is associated with repressed sexuality and adherence to outdated ideas.

In this complex field, it seems sensible to explore the significance of religion in Ivan Illich's thinking. A short excerpt from his speech entitled *The personal decision in a world dominated by communication* will serve as a guide. In it, he says, not long before his death: "I end with a reflection on how words and objects function in our modern society. The best way to quickly understand where I want to end up [is to say that words and objects function] magically, religiously. I don't want to be a religious man. I am the descendant of the

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martyrs who, according to Roman law, which was very solid and precise, were thrown to the beasts as truly irreligious [*veri irreligiosi*]; they were people who somehow understood that Jesus freed us from what was then, as today, called religion."

Illich gives us some insights into his understanding of religion here: Ancient Roman law apparently defined religious behavior exactly. Jesus freed his followers from these legal regulations. Therefore, the first followers of Christ came into conflict with Roman law through their explicitly irreligious behavior and were brutally punished for it. It is in this vein that Illich does not want to be a religious man and criticizes a modern "religious" use of words and objects. Illich suggests a historical continuity of the concept of religion and, at first glance, categorically rejects religion *tout court*.

His insights raise a number of questions that I would like to address in this article. (a) First, I place religion (Latin: *religio*) in the context of Roman law and connect Illich's statements from the lecture with his understanding of incarnational freedom, which he developed in *The Rivers North of the Future*. (b) In a second step, I consider religion as a polemical concept. In doing so, I consider particularly the interpretation of Judaism as "religion" and Christianity as "outbidding religion with faith". (c) I then link the perversion of incarnational freedom to the modern religious use of words that Illich addresses. (d) Finally, I summarize my thoughts and interpret Illich's theology not as an abolition of religion, but as its inner transformation.

a) Religion and law

It is no coincidence that Illich refers us to Roman law for the concept of religion. This is where its etymological roots lie. The Latin (adjective) *religiosus* initially referred, similarly to *sacer*, to an area or object that was withdrawn from free use by legal and cultic rules of conduct. *Religio* preserves the

separation between a separate (sacred) and an everyday (profane) sphere. Subsequently, the adjective could also be applied to people who observed these rules and the separations they established with particular care. This is why Cicero famously derives *religio* not from *religare* ("to bind"), but from *relegere*, literally "to read again (and again)." A religious person is therefore someone who carefully reviews the legal regulations repeatedly in order to be able to follow them precisely.

Roman law provides precise definitions of specific spaces, times, and affiliations. In this way, the entire world is structured through categorical divisions. For example, the *pomerium* separated the city of Rome from the rest of the world, and the *augur* defined the *templum*, the area chosen by a deity for its cult. Religion consists of respectful observance of these divisions. Roman religion thus describes a mode in which the strict legal boundaries are confirmed and obeyed. Religion here is therefore not a special sphere, not a social subsystem, let alone a community of faith. Rather, it describes a relationship to the categorical boundaries set in Roman law.

According to Illich, Jesus has freed people, or at least the martyrs (and Illich himself), from this relationship to the law. Illich does not elaborate here on how we are to imagine this liberation. But it apparently led the martyrs to openly disregard not only decency and custom, but also criminally sanctioned norms of behavior, thus bringing them into open conflict with the law. In the martyrs, a new relationship to the law has replaced the old one. Religious observance has been replaced by free disregard or negligence.

These two relationships seem to correspond quite closely to those that Illich contrasts in his exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan in *The Rivers North of the Future*. Illich describes the world in which the parable is set as very similar to that of the Roman religion. People are neatly sorted according to their membership in certain groups. The legal

and moral relationship between these groups also determines how people behave toward one another. Illich refers to this as the connection between the Greek *ethnos* (people, clan) and *ethos* (norms of behavior). Who my neighbor is, who is commanded to me, is completely determined by my *ethnos*.

The Samaritan, on the other hand, embodies the liberation that Jesus made possible. He does not help the Jew in the ditch because it is his ethical duty (*ethos*). Rather, he helps him even though the Jew comes from a foreign *ethnos* and there is therefore no common *ethos* that would oblige him to help. On the contrary, he even commits a kind of betrayal by caring for an enemy. The Samaritan's behavior disrupts what had previously been considered moral decency and threatens the coherence of the prevailing social categories. The Samaritan allows himself to respond to his movement from his gut towards the Jew. He chooses his neighbor without restriction of ethnicity by establishing a free relationship. Illich links this directly to his concept of faith. For him, faith is a "mode of knowledge that [...] is based on the word of someone I trust, and [...] this knowledge, which is based on trust, is more fundamental than anything I can know through reason." Faith also disregards prior knowledge (cf. *ethnos*) about the other in human encounters and takes them at their word when they reveal themselves. In this respect, faith and religion represent two opposing relationships to law.

b) Religion as a polemical concept

Illich's polemical rejection of religion and his high regard for faith draw clear parallels to German-language Protestant theology. Karl Barth, for example, contrasts religion diametrically with faith. According to Barth, religion is about piously obeying the law and being justified before God by performing good works and observing religious and cultic rules. Beyond observing legal boundaries (as in Roman *reli-*

gio), Barth incorporates the concept of religion into Lutheran justification theology. For Barth (as for Martin Luther), faith means precisely liberation from the doomed "religious" attempt to justify oneself through good behavior by trusting in God's grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's demand for a "religionless Christianity" expressed from prison, is also well known and points in a similar direction.

Both Illich's and the German Protestant opposition to religion present us with a polemical and pointed rejection of blind obedience to the law. However, it leads to problems when we simply transfer such polemics to the phenomena commonly referred to today as "religions." The Protestant concept in particular carries anti-Jewish baggage. Judaism is often seen as a law-abiding "religion" that is surpassed by the freedom of the Christian faith. To this day, (Orthodox) Judaism is misinterpreted by Christians in its high regard for and meticulous observance of the law. The prejudice persists that Jews want to get something from God in exchange for fulfilling the law and doing good works. This is all the more strange when one compares a German Protestant service with a Jewish service. There is hardly a religious event that is more serious than a traditional Protestant service (and there is hardly a state with more laws than Germany). The Jewish services I have experienced so far, on the other hand, have been characterized by a relaxed carelessness toward the liturgy. Arriving late, leaving early, chatting, looking after children, but of course also praying – everyone does what needs to be done. Furthermore, intensive religious practice in Jewish theology in no way contradicts the fact that Jews know that their entire being is dependent on God's grace. Religious rules are not intended to enclose God in the human world and make him available, but rather to impress upon Jews their dependence on their relationship with God.

Ivan Illich, on the other hand, is a good example of a

phenomenon that Bruno Chaouat[1] has drawn attention to. According to Chaouat, in critical theory, Jews are not regarded as religiously stubborn, but as non-identitarian strangers and exiled stateless persons who transcend categorical affiliations. Illich refers to himself in some places as a "wandering Jew", thus hinting at his position between two stools. Chaouat holds this idealized image of Judaism responsible for the difficulties of modern critical theory in thinking about anti-Semitism and confronting the fact that there is now a Jewish state of Israel.

In any case, we can see that the question of the significance of religion is often linked to a particular interpretation of Judaism (and thus also of its genuinely messianic branch: Christianity). According to Protestant theology, Judaism establishes religious laws that are rendered ineffective by the Christian faith. According to Chaouat, for some critical theorist, Judaism represents the subversion of political-religious law. Neither image does justice to real Jews. Therefore, it is irresponsible to relate the pointedly polemical rejection of religion put forward by Illich, Bonhoeffer, or Barth to a specific religious community. The blind obedience to the law against which they protest has probably never formed the core of religion (in the everyday sense of a religious community). On the contrary, it could be that incarnational freedom occurs precisely within and in confrontation with "religious" traditions. Illich –deeply rooted in and at the same time quarreling with Catholicism– seems to be the best example of this.

To understand the polemical meaning of Illich's resistance to religion, we must consider it in the historical context of the time of Jesus and the early believers in the Messiah (the "martyrs"). With the establishment of the Roman Emperorship by Octavian Augustus shortly before the turn of the millennium, an era of massive expansion of the political (im-

1 Bruno Chaouat, *Is Theory Good for the Jews? French thought and the challenge of the new Antisemitism*. Liverpool University Press, 2017

perial) cult (also in the provinces), military expansion, and economic intensification began in the *imperium romanum*. Roads were built in the provinces, veterans were settled, rebel groups were crushed, and temples for the imperial cult were erected. The stark boundaries of belonging may not represent a fundamental anthropological constant, but rather an effect of the progressive intensification of imperial rule. It is only through an apparatus of power and violence that the boundaries between groups become as impassable as Illich suggests with his conception of *ethnos*. If the interpretation proposed here is correct, then the freedom that incarnation brings is a specific form of subversion of imperial power.

c) Religion and plastic words

And this brings us back to the exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Illich's interpretation famously leads to his ingenious paradigm of analyzing modernity as the corruption of the best, which is the worst (Latin: *perversio optimi quae est pessima*). The best (*optimum*) is the freedom of personal choice, through which the Samaritan creates a personal relationship that transcends the given boundaries. This best is made possible by the Incarnation, i.e., the belief that God became man in Jesus. Without the Incarnation, however, the worst (*pessimum*) is also inconceivable. For it consists in institutionally establishing and providing the new kind of turning towards one's neighbor. However, this deprives the relationship that has been created of its quality of personal freedom. The neighbor, who can be freely chosen, becomes a needy person who must be cared for. The care institutions create new categories of needs according to which they classify the needy.

However, this brings up the relationship to the law, which we have identified with the Roman *religio* and which the Samaritan transgressed through his personal decision.

Now the freedom that was supposed to free me from the obligation to behave in a certain way becomes itself a codified norm of behavior, indeed a duty that demands the strictest observance. In this way, *perversio* holds a religious element. However, the corruption of incarnational freedom is not simply a return to *religio*. It does not consist in the careful observance of legal boundaries, but rather in their leveling and flattening. In the state of *perversio*, there are no longer any boundaries or thresholds that I can transgress through my personal decision. There is only an impersonal space in which no personal decision is possible anymore. Instead, people become parts of communication or information systems controlled by management.

This is precisely the point Illich addresses in the lecture from which the opening quote is taken. It is also why he discusses the concept of religion in the first place. However, I think that Illich additionally assigns a spectrum of meanings to the concept of religion that cannot be traced back to the Roman *religio* and that is less self-evident than Illich suggests when he says: "what was then, as today, called religion." He is referring to a certain "religious" use of words and objects in modern times. In doing so, Illich draws on the amoeba or plastic words that Uwe Pörksen and he discovered. These include, for example, "communication," "system," "structure," "information," "problem," "strategy," "function," etc. These are terms that remove people, living beings, places, times, etc. from their concrete historical contexts and embed them in impersonal systems. One of the essential characteristics of plastic words, as described by Pörksen in *Plastikwörter*, is that they no longer have any concrete meaning and instead have a huge connotative range. According to Pörksen, they are "poor in content, if not meaningless [...], purely imaginary, meaningless, self-referential, and functioning only as tokens." As a result, however, they are "virtually unlimited in

their scope of application. [...] Instead of denotation, [plastic] words are dominated by connotation, which spreads in rings and waves."

In my opinion, Illich sees a connection between religion and plastic words in relation to this characteristic. The prophetic critique of cults in the Hebrew Bible recognizes the *topos* that idols are "nothing" (e.g., 1 Chr 16:26; Isa 41:29). The Hebrew word *ʿelil*, which is often translated as "idol," literally means "nothing." At their core, idols are nothing, have no substance, no meaning. The Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, often uses *eidolon* for this. In another well-known lecture, Illich described the modern conception of "life" as an idol (from *eidolon*) and thus as meaningless. Their lack of meaning allows modern plastic words to be used in any context. This enables them to serve as placeholder terms for social abundance and "solutions for everything". In this way, they become unquestioned goods and set a social cult machinery in motion. The plastic words are therefore not "religious" in the sense of the Roman *religio*, but in that they are universal and meaningless. In this way, they break down the traditional boundaries whose preservation has been the primary concern of *religio*. We are thus faced with two quite disparate spectra of meaning of the concept of religion, which Illich ingeniously short-circuits here. Ingeniously—because both types of "religion" are opposed to the incarnational freedom that Illich sought in his thinking. Neither those who preserve all prescribed boundaries nor those who level all boundaries are free.

d) Freedom

How, then, is this incarnational freedom to be understood? Freedom certainly cannot mean the abolition or destruction of "religion." If Jesus had destroyed religion, then there would be nothing left to liberate. "Freed from religion" could therefore mean not the

abolition of religion, but a free approach to it. Our relationship to religion can be paralleled here with our relationship to the past. It would be naive to think that we could free ourselves from the past by cutting all our links to it. We cannot get rid of the ghosts of the past by destroying them, but we can find a way to deal with them by accepting their legacy.

Giorgio Agamben seems to me to be aiming at a similar idea in his essay *Praise of Profanation*.[2] Following Roman law, Agamben calls the process of crossing boundaries and thus blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the profane "profanation." However, he does not mean the destruction of all religious separation, but rather its free use, for example through play. In play, separation is defused and given a new purpose. From this perspective, he even describes 'negligence as *true religio*.'

Paul provides a good example of biblical formulations of incarnational freedom in his letter to the churches in Galatia. Here, Paul writes about how the Messiah transforms both the self and social-religious boundaries: 'I live, but no longer I (*ego*), the Messiah lives in me' (2:20), and: 'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Messiah' (3:27-28). Is every 'I' and every affiliation destroyed in the Messiah, as in the modern system? Has the incarnation thus brought about the irrevocable end of personhood? Today, we are confronted in many places with such a messianism that seeks to unify the diversity of what has grown historically in the name of "humanity" or "life."

According to my interpretation proposed here, however, the boundaries of the 'I' are not abolished in the Messiah. Instead, the Messiah enables the free use of (religious) boundaries. In the Messiah, I am liberated from myself. The corruption of incarnation, on the other hand, consists in the (neo-religious) non-entities that dissolve everything into an infinite process-progress. By ex-

2 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanation*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

tending the concept of religion to the levelling of boundaries, Illich ingeniously connects the 'pre-incarnatory' with the 'corrupt' state. The erection of insurmountable walls and the destruction of historically grown boundaries thus prove to be symmetrical strategies of exercising power that make incarnatory freedom impossible. Our task is to conceive of the delicate and precarious (yet everywhere shimmering) sphere that opens up between the naturalization and codification of boundaries on the one hand and their levelling on the other. It is precisely in this sphere, that faith, trust in the word of my counterpart, is located.