

Rhetoric of immortality – describing changes in modern religion

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Religion happens. It happens in churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and other places of ritual and religious service, but it also happens in the middle of society, in everyday life, and often in situations we would normally not call religious. We can say: religion happens as rhetoric, if we understand religion as a social and human phenomenon and if we understand rhetoric as more than persuasive speeches or texts. I would like to argue that rhetoric and the study of religion might benefit from cooperation: if we want to know more about rhetoric in society, it is important to understand the role of religion in large parts of social communication in past and present times; and if we want to know more about religion as a social phenomenon, it is important to use rhetorical expertise and perspectives to understand the dynamics religion induces. Some turning points of the “rhetoric of immortality” in Germany over the last 200 years will be presented. It is to show how strongly religion is intertwined with other social processes – and how much rhetoric can help us to get these aspects of religion into focus, especially in phases of change. But before giving these historical sketches, I would like to turn to three methodological considerations.

Short version of a long tradition: rhetoric in the study of religion

This is not the place to spread out the history of the implicit and explicit use of rhetorical analysis in the study of religion, even if we started this history as recently as with the beginning of the academic discipline in the 19th century. Two points should be sufficient to make an argument. Using rhetoric for the analysis of religion has a strong and long tradition in Europe. It meant above all reading and inquiring into texts with respect to their style, figures and metaphors, analysing genres and arguments. Several developments culminated in this tradition. Christian theology assimilated antique rhetorical knowledge and used it for the canonisation of the bible. The concept of biblical exegesis became religious practice as well as it became the basis of philology and various academic techniques that flourished in the era of the renaissance. This interconnection between religious interpretation and the use of rhetorical tools was paramount for the longstanding European attitude towards the criteria for defining religion. In the long run, theology as religious *and* scientific undertaking gave form to the assumption that every religion is characterised mainly by a “holy text” and written doctrines and dogmas. This attitude allowed early academic scholars of the study of religion to compare foreign concepts via the criterion “text” to the Christian model while at the same time reducing religions to texts helped to keep up the agendas of western ideas of religion.¹ For a long time the academic tradition of the phenomenology of religion shaped its

¹ See the so called father of the scientific study of religion, F.M. Müller, who proposed a theory of comparison based on linguistic typologies, but on the whole aimed at a proof for the superiority of the

objects as phenomena *sui generis*, not comparable to other human actions and not to be treated by sociological, psychological or other cultural or natural sciences. The effect of this methodological paradox is that the results of the research confirm the expectations: if you take your own religion as the standard, you will find deprived forms everywhere. Given the historical circumstances of the early study of religion this approach fulfilled saving functions for religious perspectives, it allowed making religion into a scientific object while equally protecting it against any other claims of explanation and critique.

In accordance with this interest, rhetoric had to be reduced to a tool for the exegesis of texts. Otherwise rhetoric would have shown the constructions and devices of how religions interpret reality; rhetoric would have demonstrated the relativity of religion to other possibilities of interpretation. We are reminded of the platonic arguments against rhetoric as make-believe and falsehood, and until today we can observe that using rhetoric as a method for the study of religion is combined with the rejection of the critical potential of the rhetorical standpoint.² The interesting point in this defensive paradox is that rhetoric as a perspective is not per se anti-religious as a definite position. The *skandalon* of rhetoric, as Michael Cahn expressed it,³ is not that it is anti-religious but that it provides the idea of a human being not necessarily needing religion, respectively a position *apart* from an affirmative or negative confession or belief. Let us name such a position scientific.

The other tradition using rhetoric in the study of religion is marked by the cultural turn of the 1990s⁴, indebted to critical rhetorical tradition and in parts known as the writing culture debate and the rhetorical turn. We owe to this phase reflections on the conditions of science and on the rhetorical construction of what we call history and what we call religion. But today these critical insights are said to be superseded, whereas one could argue that the consequences have not yet been drawn in some approaches of the study of religion. Rhetoric again was reduced to some ideas or features instead of seeing the whole of the possibilities. Today, the cultural study of religion defines religion as a special form of communication and action, as human behaviour that might possibly concern all areas of society and individual life and which uses every medium for expression and influencing its surroundings. Religion does not only consist of “belief” and “holy texts”, religion is practice and ritual, interpretation of the world, lifestyle, legitimation for violence and for peacekeeping; it can influence how people eat, how they love, what they laugh about, how they vote and what kind of social group they want to belong to. Religion is connected to power and politics, to economics and social values as much as to ideas and decisions of individuals. And religion is not the only object of the study of religion, because one has to have some expertise in other systems of interpretation if one wants to compare or describe, for example, politics of religion, art and religion, economics and religion and the interactions between them. To analyse this dynamic network of phenomena we need dynamic criteria and a theory that integrates communicative processes and knowledge of how communication creates reality.

Is there a religious rhetoric?

Religious rhetoric could be a helpful term as an instrument of analysis. But is there such an object as religious rhetoric for scientific observation? How do we define it, identify it, and how and to what end do we analyse and explain it? Is it religious rhetoric, when the Dalai Lama talks about Tibet? Or the Pope speaks about the use of condoms? If not – why not? Is singing a mantra

Christian religion: Friedrich Max Müller, *Beiträge zur vergleichenden Religionswissenschaft* (Essays), Leipzig 1869; also: *Chips from a German Workshop*, Vol. I (London, 1870).

² See the various approaches in Walter Jost and Wendy Olmstead, ed., *Rhetorical Invention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

³ Michael Cahn, “The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: Six Tropes of Disciplinary Self-Constitution,” in Richard H. Roberts and James M. M. Good, eds., *The Recovery of Rhetoric* (London: Duckworth, 1993). 61-84, 70.

⁴ For orientation Herbert W. Simons, ed., *The Rhetorical Turn. Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Richard H. Roberts and James M. M. Good, eds., *The Recovery of Rhetoric* (London: Duckworth, 1993).

religious rhetoric? No? But a prayer? What is the difference to a rhetoric of politics? And is it religious rhetoric when a US-president speaks of crusades and the existence of evil?⁵ Many more examples show that there are no absolute and no clear-cut definitions but only conventions of what is perceived as religious rhetoric. First of all, the question for a specifically *religious* rhetoric is embedded in the discussion of academic definitions of religion and the historization of these definitions mentioned above.⁶ Here again we should distinguish the colloquial or everyday understanding of religion from the descriptive term of an academic meta-language. But even when we use the term religious rhetoric as a reflexive, second order, historically bound academic term, it is still unclear what we exactly get into focus with it. Deciding is simple as long as we refer to utterances in a religious framing. Praying and preaching are traditional forms of religious rhetoric, certain formulas and narratives would doubtlessly count as such – if we knew the tradition referred to. But is this sharp enough a term for traditions and cultures that use completely different forms than preaching and praying? Should we want to use the term religious rhetoric we should at least keep several points in mind:

Firstly, the term is dependent on what a society understands as religious, how and whether religion is distinguished from other subsystems of the society and how much a cultural study of religion has distanced itself from its European roots of perception. The term is appropriate for the cultural study of religion if understood descriptively, historically and heuristically. Anti-religious rhetoric or atheistic positions would then be part of religious rhetoric. Instead of calling the effects of religious rhetoric “magical” or “fascinating” the aim would be to describe and explain the strategies and influences of religious aesthetics.⁷

Secondly, objects we call religious rhetoric exist only in comparison and delimitation to other types of rhetoric, e.g. economic, political or scientific. These types are characterized by certain styles, metaphors, aesthetics, or better: by the specific use of communicational forms with different aims and premises.

Thirdly, we have to differentiate whether we are talking about utterances in a religious framing, utterances we can isolate from religious traditions finding them in other fields of society such as in politics or in a novel, or if we call a certain quality of utterances religious rhetoric including revelation, claiming truth without empirical proofs but with reference to absolute authorities, or using self-protective strategies to avoid critique and relativity. None of these strategies is exclusively used in religious contexts, but nevertheless they are significant for systems we call religions or we are doing research on.

And lastly, if religious is such a flexible and historically variable term, rhetoric is no less. No matter what may be meant by special versions of rhetoric, at least we recognize a pluralisation of rhetorics: there is a rhetoric of knowledge, of politics, of economy, an academic rhetoric or popular rhetoric or even populist rhetoric. And there is rhetoric as a system of knowledge, practical and theoretical, as a discipline and tradition of western education, politics and ideas. So, what does religious rhetoric mean? There is no way out other than to explain anew with every research what kind of tradition and effect we discover under the searchlight of religious rhetoric, especially when we treat phenomena like political speeches, spiritual aspects of healing and medicine, the performance of pop culture or the metaphors of economy in the light of rituals and worldviews of

⁵ For an excellent analysis of the religious and historical background and the interpretation of the second gulf war, see Bruce Lincoln, “The Cyrus Cylinder, the Book of Virtues, and the ‘Liberation’ of Iraq: On Political Theology and Messianic Pretensions,” in *Religionen in Konflikt: Vom Bürgerkrieg über Ökogewalt bis zur Gewalterinnerung im Ritual*, ed. Vasilios Makrides and Jörg Rüpke (Münster: Aschendorf, 2004), 248-64.

⁶ See Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-282.

⁷ A good explanation of the effects of fascist rhetoric instead of a category as *quasi-magic*, see Hubert Cancik, “‘Wir sind jetzt eins’. Rhetorik und Mystik in einer Rede Hitlers (Nürnberg, 11.9.1936),“ in: *Zur Religionsgeschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, ed. Günter Kehrer (München: Kösel, 1980)13- 48. The question of the use of *fascination* as a heuristic term is considered in Alexandra Grieser, “Religion als fascinans? Zur Wissenschafts- und Religionsgeschichte eines faszinierenden Begriffs,” in: *Faszination. Zur historischen Konjunktur und heuristischen Tragweite eines Begriffs*, ed. Andy Hahnemann, and Björn Weyand, forthcoming (2009).

a given society. This heuristic potential can be unfolded under different aspects. From the standpoint of rhetoric it is interesting to ask what kind of rhetorical patterns, devices, aims and modes of effectiveness characterise religious rhetoric. From the perspective of the study of religion it is interesting to define religion via its special rhetoric practices and effects. It is a special form of persuasion that discriminates religious from other interpretations; it is a special form of legitimation that discriminates religious actions from others. Religious rhetoric can be perceived as a kind of dialectical movement: we can extract certain rhetorical practices from traditions of religious communication developing typologies and collections, and then, when we study these traditions again, we can discover their elements, patterns and strategies even when they appear in political speeches, novels or modern art. Religious rhetoric as an academic concept is similar to grounded theory in social studies: it does not simply describe a given object, but has to be retied and adjusted to what the objects of cultural research produce, that is: what humans do.

What kind of rhetoric is needed?

If we want to use rhetoric as a method and language of description in the cultural study of religion an innovative rhetorical approach has to rely on the traditions and debates of its sources, on the one hand, while adjusting and adding to current concepts, on the other hand. Rhetoric must be applied in its analytical potential, not in its normative aspects. It is understood as descriptive, not as prescriptive, meaning that the success of any utterance is not the leading principle, but it is what has to be explained. Rhetoric has to integrate a pluralistic, individualistic and democratic “audience”, conditions of modern societies and has to turn away from its focus on juridical situations and its notion of the omnipotent orator. It has to enlarge its theories to other media than texts. Religious rhetoric is not limited to speeches, texts and verbal utterances: we also need a rhetoric of the senses, of sounds, of aromas and odours, of movements and dances because the effects of rhythm, colours, sounds and pictures can very helpfully be described in rhetorical categories. We can understand rhetoric as a collection of basic elements and forms, as an analysis of how these elements are combined and varied, how they interact and to what end they are used. It is the challenge of the cognitive sciences to combine theories of perception, of conceptual metaphor and of cultural-historical knowledge of the rhetorical tradition to explain the coevolution of nature and culture in such elaborated systems as religions.⁸

For the moment I will focus on just three of many more aspects of an innovative theory of rhetoric. In the 1970s, Lothar Bornscheuer set the Aristotelian topics into a new framing. He understood it no longer just as a theory of argumentation, but much more as a theory of the *social imagination* (“gesellschaftliche Einbildungskraft”) of a community.⁹ Describing the material of this social imagination and the way how it is combined and used means to present the repertoire and the structures of what a community accepts as true or at least of what can be thought, debated, felt and described. Such a social imagination is driven by conservative forces as much as by innovative forces. We can write a history of persistent *topoi*, on the one hand, and of their flexible and differing use in every historical period, on the other. With this understanding of its topics we can see that a society has a stock of imaginations which can be chosen and changed by individuals. Everything which is accepted as real in a community of communication is accepted through processes of communication and persuasion. *Rhetoricity* is the term for explaining that humans do not cognize immediately but through media and through the forms and figures of the presentation

⁸ Compare the debates of the *conceptual metaphor* from George Lakoff und Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Fillmore, 2002). Application in rhetoric see Jeanne Fahnestock, “Rhetoric in the Age of Cognitive Science,” in: *The Viability of Rhetoric*, ed. Richard Graff (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 159-179.

⁹ Lothar Bornscheuer, *Topik. Zur Struktur der gesellschaftlichen Einbildungskraft* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976). See also the work on social *topoi* in Martin Wengeler, *Topos und Diskurs. Begründung einer argumentationsanalytischen Methode und ihre Anwendung auf den Migrationsdiskurs (1960-1985)* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003).

of the world. At the same time, rhetoricity means that these representations are the material of what we call reality. Religion is no exception from this quality: for the academic view religion is neither true nor false, instead we can describe it as based upon metaphors, symbolic action, rhetorical forms. Its rhetoricity can be analysed and explained and it is an important factor in the social imagination shaping reality in very different ways.

As the second element I would like to mention the fact that rhetorical thinking always integrated different qualities of effectiveness of communication. Applying *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos* or the trias of *probare*, *delectare* and *movere* to an analysis of religion for example allows us to recognise that religion definitely has entertaining functions and it helps us to see that seemingly irrational notions have a highly rational logic. We can learn about the attraction of a religion through the *ethos* of one person. Getting these aspects into focus contributes to a complex interpretation which is adequate to the complexity of religion as an academic topic.

The third aspect to be mentioned is the introduction of another key term: the rhetorical understanding of *plausibility*. As a quality that makes people accept and acclaim an argument, an imagination or a representation, plausibility is located on a somewhat lower level of acceptance than persuasion. It provides the basis on which people in a society can think, argue, persuade, describe, and even remember and feel within the framing of the social imagination. It provides figures in discourses. Plausibility understood this way is a historical quality dependent on the development in all areas of society. Berger and Luckmann called this plausibility-structure.¹⁰ When we look at the history of religion we can see that different factors influence each other: sometimes economy and industrialisation are the beginning of change, sometimes a new political power is the initial force, and in another case it is the new religion being imported into a culture. In most cases it is a complex network of all of these, and we have to name the effects of religion in this interaction. If religion is – as we said – an element of the social imagination, then we can see its participation in two directions:

- religion must keep itself plausible and attractive if it wants to persist, and
- religion has the function to explain and to manage changes in plausibility-structure, notably if changes happen to come fast, as it is the case during the period of modernisation and still is in times of globalisation.
- So the leading question is: “What makes religion plausible, and what is made plausible by religion?”

This question shows how strongly this rhetorical perspective is connected to a new and complex view on the interconnected history of religion. This perspective allows us not to fall back upon what people might believe, but to ask what kind of plausibilities in a society grow up, gain the quality of reality, lose their power and are changed, modified or substituted. Religious rhetoric consists of such plausibilities which are accepted as part of worldviews and legitimations for decisions and actions and thus as a special part of the construction of reality in a given community.

Examples for changes in the rhetoric of immortality

Why choose immortality as a subject for a larger study on changes in the modern history of religion?¹¹ Mainly because believing in god or in some kind of afterlife appears to be a good criterion for many scholars of religion to find out about modern religion and because it serves as a minimum definition of religion in western modernity at the same time. In the 1980s, a decrease of

¹⁰ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Double Day, 1966); dt. *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*, transl. Monika Plessner (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1969/2001), 165.

¹¹ Grieser, Alexandra, *Transformationen von Unsterblichkeit. Zum Wandel religiöser Plausibilitätsmuster in der Moderne* (München: Peter Lang Verlag, 2008).

religion and also of belief in afterlife was diagnosed. At the same time, a very successful model of immortality arose in the Western Europe and the USA: almost nobody was unacquainted with reincarnation, no matter in what specific form, whether from the tradition of Buddhism or Hinduism or in the adapted forms of western esotericism. Today, we also find ideas of immortality in novels and TV-series: ghost whisperers, mentalists and returns from other worlds can be seen every night. What happened? If religion is defined by the criterion “belief”, assuming religious practice means having one belief and being committed to one organisation and assuming that belief in immortality is framed in the *topoi* of heaven and hell, scholars were obviously right to announce a “decline of the afterlife”.¹² But if we look at religion as a pluralistic option, as personal choice and combinations of different options, then we can see dynamic interaction between rapid changes, a loss of traditional plausibilities and a communicational field in which the changes during the last 200 years were debated: it was religion and especially immortality that provided the subjects and imaginations of the modernist quarrels.¹³ Ideas of immortality were the discursive kernels of debates which concerned dogmatic religion and rational theology as much as the modern individual, the notion of the soul, the body and the question of how a society can be kept together. All those concepts were at stake, and the immortality of the soul was one of the metaphors used in the era of crisis. I will roughly mark some turning points showing changes in the imagination of immortality, turning points which obviously stand for longer and more complex processes.

Early romanticism: from resurrection to transition

After enlightenment and the French Revolution it was the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher who redefined religion in mainly aesthetic terms:¹⁴ (On religion. Speeches to its cultured despisers, 1799) Religion is “sense and taste for the infinite” and “feeling and intuition of the universe”. Sounding rather poetic, these definitions deliver a rational philosophical argumentation based on the figure of the interrelatedness of the finite and the infinite, the finite being conceptualised as the revelation of the infinite. Religion is thought of as a special kind of perception and the human individual finds himself in the position of the mediator in between the two, a mediator of his own.

This new notion of religion allowed rejecting dogmatic theology which was no longer acceptable as well as Kant’s rational reduction of religion to morality. It also provided a new form of individualistic and aesthetic religiosity placing modern man at the centre of the universe, not as an exponent of the critical enlightened era, but as a mediator of the transition between life and death. In this concept, immortality is disapproved of as a theological dogma and as illusory self-betrayal. It is neither strong belief nor commitment to a religious dogma which is such an important pattern of modern religion, rather it is the idea of fluent transitions and dialectic moves between parallel worlds that form the modern *topos* of life after death. It is no longer a definite space or place like heaven and hell, instead it is imagined as a state of consciousness, a perception reaching out for a sphere that is only limited by a blurring line.

It is by a highly rational genre – the philosophical treatise – that the effect of the *movere* is privileged in this new topology of religion. It is a complex *probare* mixed up with poetic images, and it is one of the most successful inventions of a new and persuasive notion of religion: who would object today in Western Europe that “true religion” is something internal, individual and a phenomenon concerning the feelings of every single human being? It is a widely appreciated pattern that true religion is peaceful und positive and that religion connected to power and violence is simply misused by politics. It is also widely accepted that reconciliation and peace between

¹² Thomas Macho, *Todesmetaphern. Zur Logik der Grenzerfahrung* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987); Jan Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife* (London and New York: Routledge 2001).

¹³ See Lucian Hölscher, ed., *Das Jenseits. Facetten eines religiösen Begriffs in der Neuzeit*, (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2007).

¹⁴ Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion. Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*, ed. Andreas Arndt (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1799/2004); engl. *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, transl. Richard Crouter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

people of different religions is possible, if only everybody would at least acknowledge that all religions go back to the same principles or that “we all believe in the same god”. Emphasising the similarities instead of knowing and accepting the differences is the most plausible answer to the question of religious conflicts. This view of plurality is based on quite abstract constellations that are open to individual interpretations and allow comparing different religions as exponents of the “finite” expressions of the one and real “infinite” religion. At the same time, this model of plurality in unity keeps the existence of a religious sphere in rising modernity alive. It is not by accident that this initial text by Schleiermacher is entitled “speeches” and that the man who popularised these romantic notions of religion is a painter. Caspar David Friedrich explicitly transformed the verbal rhetoric of the infinite into colour and provided it with the connotations of longing and loneliness. It is the long-lasting plausibility of experience, of religion as art and art as religion and of religion as an aesthetic *Erlebnis* that is introduced into the social imagination of the time.

New media as gateways to the hereafter: spiritism, media and the battle for the soul

Around 1850, spiritism¹⁵ rose in Europe both as a practice as in séances and mediumism and as a repertoire of interpretations of what happens to persons after death. First and most importantly: the place where individuals remain after dying was imagined as rather nearby, as a parallel world, quite easily accessible by media, be they human or technical. Being a medium or using a medium is the vital metaphor for the spiritistic effort to prove that more existed than positivistic science was able to capture. Spiritists were struggling with science about the dominance and the power to define reality at the end of the 19th century and they used the same patterns of plausibility as science did. Spiritism tried to be acknowledged as science as it developed from a cultural practice with more or less sensational interest and *delectare*-function¹⁶ to an enterprise with claims on scientific *probare* and experimental evidence. A religious position turned into a critique of modern culture and science by surpassing scientific ideals: spiritism claimed to be the real science because their representatives continued to do research at the limits of knowledge where the “normal sciences” left the scene.¹⁷

These spiritistic experiments used media as their main structure: human mediums who were made famous through the still young mass media – a phenomenon that is not imaginable before the modern press and telegraph. Other culture techniques mediated the message: automatic writing lead to little machines, recording of the voice was tested, morse alphabet, telegraphing and – most evidently – photographs of ghosts or spirits were used to prove the existence of a transcendent reality not far away. On the one side, this reality displayed resistance against materialistic worldviews and dominating claims of an autocratic science. On the other side, the idea of possible contact answered to individual needs of personal communication which means it conceptualised these contact as social ties which were about to vanish in the modern industrialised world.

With the help of another example we can see that this new form of immortality was ridiculed and at the same time largely debated. In 1903, a court case in Berlin attracted the attention of the local and international press for weeks. Anne Rothe, a medium, was accused of betrayal. Her offence was pretending to materialise flowers and fruits but in fact to have those objects under her skirts. The sentence as well as the experts present during the trial were absolutely inadequate from

¹⁵ In the English language, spiritualism means both, the specific tradition of mediumism in the second half of the 19th century and the more general meaning of spiritual phenomena (in German: spirituell vs. spiritistisch). I stick to the differentiation and use spiritism as some other scholars do.

¹⁶ As the main function of early spiritism in Germany analysed by Timo Heimerdinger, *Tischlein rück' dich. Das Tischrücken in Deutschland um 1850. Eine Mode zwischen Spiritismus, Wissenschaft und Geselligkeit* (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2001).

¹⁷ See Diethard Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten. Geisterglauben und die Entstehung des Spiritismus* (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 2002); Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Priska Pytlik, *Okkultismus und Moderne. Ein kulturhistorisches Phänomen und seine Bedeutung für die Literatur um 1900* (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 2005).

a current point of view. But we can learn from the sources that psychologists, medical scientists, lawyers, experts for religion and well known politicians argued – not about the deeds of Frau Rothe, but about the definition of the soul, of possible spiritual worlds and about the question who has the power and the rhetoric to define reality.

Immortality without death: Transhumanism and medical immortality

Instead of giving you examples for the most successful *topos* of immortality in the modern western culture – reincarnation¹⁸ – I prefer to deliver an idea of the current discourse that might question your own norms of plausibility. It is the idea of immortality as the end of death in itself, the idea of staying alive endlessly through medical and technical progress. This idea concerns different aspects, it has various representatives and it is more complex than we can discuss here. Just let me say so much: the idea is that right at the moment of death the body or better the information contained in the cells of the body and particularly the brain can be preserved by deep freezing and reawakened as soon as medical techniques are able to stop the process of aging. This is not utopia as commercial firms offer this cryonic service for the whole body or just the head. In traditional religious imaginations this container takes the place of intermediary places where souls have to wait for judgement or reincarnation. The bodies or parts of it wait for the time of medical redemption, that is the option of an unlimited lifespan. As you can see on the website of the cryonic firm Alcor this is an offer so plausible that people spend their money on it whatever hope they connect with it. The connection of traditional imaginations and the adaption of new sciences and techniques do not just lead to beliefs or opinions but to decisions and actions and a new form of organising the situation of death.¹⁹

For us the question whether the idea will work out or not is not so interesting, rather more interesting is in what terms and *topoi* it is debated. Under the FAQ passages about religious questions you will find the question whether this option to live without limit is a religion in itself.²⁰ This is the table of contents:

“The Religious Basis for Cryonics

- Christianity and Cryonics
- Cryonics and Orthodoxy
- Cryonics: A Chance to Live Indefinitely [link]
- Religion and Cryonics
- Why a Religious Person Can Choose Cryonics”

We find classical forms of apologetics in the answers, mainly referring to the enlightenment position of human’s freedom towards his merely biological limits of his will. In the passages on “spiritual questions” we find the whole traditional repertoire of debates about the relationship between body and soul:

“Spiritual Questions

- What happens to the soul?
- But doesn’t the soul depart at death?
- When does the soul depart?
- What is the Christian view of cryonics?
- Will cryonics make people immortal?

¹⁸ This subject is well treated, for example by Helmut Zander, *Geschichte der Seelenwanderung in Europa: Alternative religiöse Traditionen von der Antike bis heute* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1999).

¹⁹ See, as only one example, <http://www.alcor.org>

²⁰ <http://www.alcor.org/Library/index.html#religion>

- Why do some futurists speak of "immortality"?
- Is cryonics a religion?"

The new model of interpretation uses the leading metaphor of information, the centre of this model being the brain, and the scientists do explain how death, the soul and the “leaving” of the soul can be understood:

“Q: When does the soul depart?”

“A: The ultimate limit of resuscitation is determined by the state of the brain. Once all physical traces of memory and personality are erased from the brain, resuscitation of the original person becomes impossible by any technology. The loss of these traces must correspond to loss of the soul. – The loss of all brain information that makes a person unique means that person has vanished from this world, and they are beyond reach of anything that can be created by man. Without special cooling, this likely occurs some hours after clinical death. Sometimes this can happen even when the heart is still beating, such as in Alzheimer's disease, or in cases of "brain death" for patients on life support. The irreversible loss of memory and personality information in the brain is sometimes called the ‘information theoretic criterion’ for death. It is our sincere belief that cryonics patients are not past this point.”

With a new technique traditional plausibilities are questioned, new options seem to rise at the horizon. It is in religious terms that old and new imaginations are adjusted and that credibility is produced. The genre of communication is expert talk with the *ethos* of competence and of giving objective and safe information as *probare* und *docere*. No fun, no feelings, no business, just the scientific truth and in the end a confession: “It is our sincere belief ...”. If we do not find any *pathos* in the style of the debate, we find another sort of *pathos*, which is the one of scientific utopia and the belief in progress without negativity. If we follow these ideas we will meet cyborgs, genetically selected beings and the old vision of the New Adam and the self creation of man. With an argument of the neurophysiologist Detlef B. Linke I am going to close this chain of examples. Linke reports on the state of the art in transplanting brain cells. At present it is imaginable to be able to replace not just organs or skin but also parts of the brain which questions whether memory and character are also transmitted. Linke warns us, though, that we should ask ourselves who it is who lives forever – and whether we are in danger of missing our “real immortality” as resurrection in the Christian sense. Linke activates old patterns against new ones and this example shows that in the ongoing process of changing plausibilities religious imaginations are seldom lost, but instead gain new rhetorical functions in new situations.

Such complicated and dynamic processes in which religion and science compete and in which feedback reactions between medical progress and human hopes and fears occur all belong to a modern history of religion. Instead of a rise or fall of traditional beliefs in afterlife, we could see how intensely every era has to work on its own problems through imaginations, transformations and explications of the unknown. Rhetoric as an analytical method and analytical perspective on religion helps to integrate these processes into a larger cultural analysis, it helps to show how much they shape reality and it helps in being open towards differences between our own expectations and what we actually find in the social imagination, between old and new, own and other plausibilities.