INTRODUCTION: The Truth of the Incarnation and the Incarnation of the Truth

Concerning the discussion of religion and contingency, one can hardly offer a more theological answer to the question about the nature of religious truth than by linking the latter to the incarnation, the core Christian doctrine. In this contribution, however, we would like to highlight how a theological insight may assist a philosophical reflection on religious truth and, in so doing, a philosophical hermeneutics of religion. In order to achieve this, we will suggest a replacement of the and in the title of this introduction with an is, reading, “the truth of the incarnation is the incarnation of the truth,” and the other way around, “the incarnation of the truth is the truth of the incarnation.” In what follows, we will elaborate on this point in two parts.

First, we will show how, from a theological-epistemological perspective, religious truth cannot be thought of apart from, or without an irreducible link to, particularity and contingency. As the starting point of our reflection, we will engage the current situation of religious plurality and the challenges it puts forward for the truth claims of Christianity. We will evaluate three classical answers to this question, and reflect on their inherent weaknesses to treat both the indissoluble plurality of religious truth claims, and the irreducible seriousness of one’s own theological truth claim. Then we will trace how the doctrine of the incarnation functions in these models (and at what price), and, consequently, attempt to overcome the diagnosed weaknesses. In order to achieve this, we will elaborate how this doctrine intrinsically relates questions about theological truth to the very particularity and contingency of history and its interpretation.
In a shorter second part, we will engage the contemporary philosophical discussion regarding the hermeneutics of religion in continental phenomenology, deconstructionism and hermeneutics. For a lot of leading continental philosophers, it would seem that, in a hermeneutics of religion, language, and thus particularity, is conceived of as contamination; thinking religious truth involves a radical hermeneutics which ultimately strives to reach beyond language—although for some this is an impossible enterprise. It is here that the fundamental-theological adagio that the incarnation of truth is the truth of the incarnation could be of help in coming to a more adequate philosophical hermeneutics of religion.

2. Incarnation and the Nature of Christian-Theological Truth Claims

Secularisation did not succeed in expelling religion from modern society. The so-called secularisation hypothesis—more modernisation means less religion, and more religion implies a lesser degree of modernisation—has not substantiated itself in the facts. In addition, a multitude of fundamental life options and religions has filled the vacuum left by the ousting of the Christian religion and not simply an overall secular culture. All of this has significant consequences for those who reflect on Christianity today. It is no longer primarily the secular, modern culture of science and emancipation that challenges Christians to renew their understanding of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ, but rather the encounter with the diversity of religions and fundamental life options that forces them to reflect on their faith. When we endeavour to address these questions, it becomes clear that the encounter or confrontation with other (world) religions presents Christians with a twofold challenge.

In the first instance, questions arise with respect to the relationship between the Christian faith and the other (world) religions. In the last decennia, three now classical theological models of thought were develop-
opposed to deal with this first challenge: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. We will investigate the problems surrounding the discussion of these three models in the following paragraph. Suffice it to say, for the time being, that none of the three conceptual strategies appear to be subtle enough to formulate an adequate and plausible answer to the question, given the fact that a delicate balance is required in maintaining the Christian identity and truth claim, on the one hand, and establishing a fundamental respect for other religions, including their own truth claims, on the other.

Secondly, the confrontation with (someone adhering to) a different religion forces Christian men and women to reflect on their own identity: what does being Christian mean exactly? What distinguishes Christians from those of different faiths? What does the Christian truth claim consist of and what does it mean in practice? How can we justify this claim against the background of religious diversity, and more concretely, in inter-religious communication?

The Pitfalls of Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism

We alluded to the three classical theological strategies to conceptualise the relationship between the Christian faith and other (world) religions: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. We now present a brief sketch of each strategy according to its primary features.²

(a) Exclusivism, with extra ecclesiam nulla salus (“there is no salvation outside the church”) as its motto, maintains that there is no truth or salvation to be found outside the Christian faith, outside the Christian faith community. Those who do not accept Christianity as the way to salvation are not saved. Those who adhere to a different religion should convert to the true faith, when they have come into contact with Christianity. This strategy bears witness to both a deep sense of trust in the redemptive truth of the Christian faith and, at the same time, a recognition of the gravity of the Christian truth claim. God’s universal salvific will is strictly bound to the saving mediation of Jesus Christ and the salvific necessity of the church. The strategy is not quite as rigid as it

might seem, however: those who adhere to a different belief system, yet
desire implicitly to be baptised and thus to belong to the church, can still
be saved.

(b) Inclusivism argues that while the Christian faith is the true reli-
gion, this does not exclude the possibility that an element of truth and
salvation may be found in the other religions. As a matter of fact, God’s
salvific will extends to all people. All those who seek God and live ac-
cording to their own conscience can be saved. Some theologians, nota-
ably Karl Rahner, speak in this regard of “anonymous Christians.” The
fragments of truth and salvation apparent in such men and women, how-
ever, only acquire their fullest significance and ultimate completion in
the light of the gospels. The Christian understanding of truth and salva-
tion provides the key to the appreciation and evaluation of the elements
of truth and salvation present in other religions. Religions that encou-
rage their adherents to charity in their interaction with others, especially
with respect to the poor and the alienated, ultimately lead their adher-
ents to implicit Christian discipleship. The fullest significance and
scope of such behaviour only become explicitly manifest in the Chris-
tian faith. The Second Vatican Council thus stated that the church “did
not reject anything true and sacred found in other religions,” even
though “the fullness of religious life is to be found in Christ.”

(c) A pluralistic perspective maintains *grosso modo* that all religions
are to be considered particularisations or concrete cases of a universal
religion or religiosity, distinct witnesses to a universal religious experi-
ence or different historical-contextual representations of one and the
same religious desire. Taken together the many religions give form to
(often complementary) perspectives on a truth that is richer than any-
thing that can be contained by one single religion. The salvation prom-
ised in Jesus Christ, therefore, cannot be presented as unique,
irreducible or complete, because the Christian perspective constitutes
only one single part of a more inclusive religious truth. Other religious
genii and figures such as Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Shiva etc. re-
veal an equal measure of worthy aspects of this ultimate reality. Reli-
gions are facets, as it were, of one and the same diamond, which no one
is able to see in its entirety.

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3 *Nostra Aetate*, 2—see Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*
It is primarily this third conceptual strategy that tends to weaken the constitutive character of the Christological confession for the Christian faith. Each in their own fashion and in their own historical context, every religion and every religious leader (Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed . . .) has opened a pathway towards the fulfilment of religious desire, which is a universally human phenomenon. Pluralistic Christian thinkers endeavour to give expression to this reality in theological terms. They mostly begin with the presupposition that God is, in principle, unknowable and that Christians cannot claim to have privileged access to such knowledge. Such a perspective calls, in the first instance, for a review of the central role of Jesus Christ, the man in whom Christians confess God has been revealed. Some do so by designating the incarnation as a myth or a metaphor, or by describing Jesus as one of the many faces of God. Others separate the second and third persons of the Trinity, the Son/the Word and the Spirit, from the concrete figure of Jesus Christ and ascribe to them a more elaborate salvific role remote from Christ. Other religious figures likewise refer to the second person of the Trinity or are inspired by the third. As a consequence, the revelation of God in Jesus, and thus also his salvific role, is considered to be limited, incomplete or imperfect. In short, in order to ascribe a role to other religions, the theologians in question radically relativize the Christian truth claim. At most, Jesus Christ represents God but he does not incarnate God. Jesus is a human example of God, but no longer God made flesh. The awareness of religious plurality thus leads to relativistic pluralism, whereby it becomes difficult to take particular religious truth claims and identity seriously, let alone uphold them. If everything has the same truth value then nothing is ultimately true.4

The question remains, of course, whether one would be better off with the other two conceptual strategies. Exclusivism tends to have totalitarian features, and has enormous difficulty in ascribing a place to

the good things that take place outside Christianity. Incarnation, as God’s concrete intervention in history, is both absolute and limiting at one and the same time: since salvation is complete in Jesus Christ, there is no room for salvation from elsewhere. The step towards Christian fundamentalism is but a short one, especially in an inimical environment that lacks any level of sensitivity towards the Christian confession. Moreover, such an exclusivistic approach is problematic at a time in which the encounter with believers of other faiths teaches Christians that religious identity, profound spirituality, authentic praxis, and a ritual that is rooted in reality are not the monopoly of Christians.

When it comes to respecting the seriousness of other religions, inclusivism is much better placed. It allows for the presence of truth and salvation outside Christianity, albeit always in a fragmentary form that can only achieve completion within Christianity. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is ultimately the deepest realisation of the traces or fragments of salvation and truth to be found in other religions. Upon closer inspection, however, inclusivism does not succeed in ascribing a worthy place to other religions, including their truth claims, in relation to the Christian faith. Whichever way one looks at it, Christianity is always more true, better, more authentic. Such a latent sense of superiority has the seeming capacity to undermine every form of inter-religious communication in advance, because it remains in essence just as totalitarian as exclusivism (although not quite as much in practice!).

In sum, each of the three classical strategies for conceptualising the relationship between Christianity and other religions inevitably comes face-to-face with its own limitations. Pluralism fails to maintain the identity and gravity of the Christian truth claim; exclusivism and inclusivism find it difficult to ascribe a satisfactory place to other religions and their truth claims. In order to engage inter-religious dialogue, pluralism requires one to relinquish in advance a core element of the Christian confession of faith. Exclusivism and inclusivism, on the other hand, take the sole veracity of their own truth claims as their point of departure and leave little if any room for any kind of otherness that challenges these truth claims. How then do we move forward?

5 Cf. Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, 103 ff.
All things considered, the three conceptual strategies can be reduced to two ways of resolving the question of the relationship between the Christian faith and other religions. In the first instance—with respect to the positions of exclusivism and inclusivism—Christianity is universalised: the Christian faith is the one and only truth, for all times and places and peoples. It is thus from the perspective of this truth that Christians perceive other religions as either completely lacking in truth or sharing in a part thereof. The person of Jesus Christ is considered primarily from the perspective of his divinity. The fact that Jesus Christ is God incarnate makes the Christian faith superior to or at least more comprehensive than other religions.

In the second instance—with respect to pluralism—Christianity is particularised: the Christian faith is (only) one perspective on or part of a greater truth. It is one specific (particular) truth that is contained in or surpassed by a higher (universal) truth. The divinity of Jesus Christ becomes relative in the incarnation. Jesus was certainly an extraordinary human being, characterised by a profound relationship with God, capable of inspiring people and leading them to a better knowledge of God, but he is not the incarnation of God, qualitatively incomparable, unique and definitive. In a best case scenario, Jesus is certainly a representative of God, but not necessarily the only one.6

If it is fair to claim that, whereas exclusivism and inclusivism uphold the confession of Christ in general terms, and are thereby inclined to deny the religious truth claims of other religions or force them to fit within the Christian truth claim, pluralism relates the confession of Christ to a transcendent, more comprehensive truth, to which other religions also contribute as partial truths or perspectives on the truth. In more technical terms: in the first instance, the historical-contingent particularity of Christian revelation is immediately positioned within a virtually meta-historical Christian frame of interpretation. Concrete narratives and contingent histories, people and events are taken up into an all-inclusive vision of history; they are integrated in the truth, the his-

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tory of salvation, and are thereby deprived in principle of their historical accidentality. In the second instance, the Christian truth claim is relativized in the service of a more general religious truth, precisely because it is merely a product of an overly historical-particular and contingent history of tradition. Precisely because it is rooted in an accidental convergence of circumstances, an historical conglomeration of narratives, events and rituals, Christianity cannot lay claim to the fullness of truth. The concrete particularity of the Christian faith narrative is thus used as an argument in support of relativizing Christianity’s truth claim: the particular can never be identified with the truth.

In both instances, *incarnation* is understood as the absorption of the historical-particular into the universal or the reduction thereof in the name of the universal. Religious truth thus comes to equal universality. This also explains the way in which the strategies in question evaluate incarnation: for exclusivism and inclusivism, incarnation is the cornerstone of the truth claim that universalises Christian particularity—the human Jesus becomes the vessel of a universal, all-embracing divine truth. For the same reason, by contrast, incarnation is the stumbling block par excellence for pluralism. Precisely because the doctrine of the incarnation universalises the historical-particular Christian truth claim, thus making it totalitarian, a respectful approach to other religions becomes impossible. It is only when the fullness of truth is not identified with the Christian faith that it becomes possible to recognise truth claims of other religions (however partial). The truth in both instances is not to be found in the specific particularity of the Christian faith but rather in either a universalised Christian faith or a universal religion, of which particular Christianity is but one single form. If truth exists then it does so in spite of particularity.

It remains a question whether the truth of a religion (understood as the truth one lives by rather than scientific truth) is best conceptualised in general, universal terms to which concrete religious traditions are related in so far as they are particular, concrete, historical and contingent. Do we not do an injustice to the specificity of theological truth by capturing it in an asymmetrical opposition between particularity and universality? Furthermore, is it not possible to understand incarnation in the opposite sense, namely by insisting that, if truth exists, it is to be found in the concrete, the historical and the particular? Is this not the ultimate meaning of incarnation: that the ‘all-too-human’ speaks for God, without, in the process, either diminishing God or assimilating human-
ity into God? In order to complete our line of inquiry we now return once again to the theological reflection on inter-religious communication.

*Theological Truth and Inter-Religious Communication*

We already noted above that contact and confrontation with other religions not only forces Christians to reflect on the relationship between Christianity and the religions in question, but also to think about the Christian faith itself and the truth claims for which it stands. An encounter with a Muslim or participation in a Hindu ritual can confront Christians with questions with respect to what they themselves stand for, how they experience their faith. In contrast to pluralism, which maintains that one’s own truth claims and one’s own identity have to be relativized in order to engage in inter-religious communication, the dynamic is precisely the reverse: in one’s contact with other religions and the dialogue that ensues therefrom, potential points of mutual kinship can emerge side by side with the reciprocal difference and uniqueness of the dialogue partners.

A discussion between Christians and Buddhists on the topic of mysticism and contemplation, one suspects, would reveal significant points of agreement while simultaneously clarifying points of difference. It truly makes a difference if one contemplates the mystery of reality as *love* or as *emptiness*. For the Christian believer, the ultimate truth of reality was definitively revealed in Jesus Christ as the mystery of love. Living one’s life according to this reality makes one a Christian and ultimately serves as the measure of one’s Christianity. It is thus rooted in such an identity—which is not acquired automatically—that Christians approach the plurality of other religions and enter into communication with them. Their endeavour to follow Christ in their lives, not only leads Christians on a path that brings them into contact with others, it also forms the background and interpretative key of the way in which they

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7 As a matter of fact, this idea is the governing hypothesis of a interdisciplinary research project at K. U. Leuven, run by Church historians and systematic theologians, investigating the nature of theological truth and the way in which theological truth is determined in the Church and theology: “Orthodoxy: Process and Product” [cited 31 August 2007]. Online: http://www.theo.kuleuven.ac.be/goa/.

8 For example, see, the biographical reflections of Joseph-Marie Verlinde in *L’expérience interdite* (Versailles: Editions Saint-Paul, 1998), chapter 9.
engage such contacts. For Christians, the recognition of goodness and truth in other religions happens of necessity in reference to Jesus Christ, precisely because they engage in contact with others as Christians. Does this mean that Christians necessarily enter into every communication in an inclusivistic way? In a certain sense: yes! How then do we deal with the objection that inclusivism leans in the direction of totalitarianism?

Perhaps we are dealing with a different type of inclusivism in such instances, an inclusivism that does not bear the universalising tendencies we noted above. Indeed, inter-religious communication teaches us in practice that there is no neutral place or neutral language in which to speak about the multiplicity of religions, and that the Christian language game also consists of a highly specific grammar and vocabulary rooted in its own background and traditions. This Christian language cannot simply be translated into the language games of other religions and vice versa. Non-Christian communication partners are often unable to recognise themselves in the language employed by pluralistic theologians, for example, to conceptualise the multiplicity of religions (because it often contains a significant residue of the Christian language game). There is no such thing as a religious Esperanto into which every religion can be translated. We have no standard religious language at our disposal that allows us to make the uniqueness of every religion, as it is sensed from within, transparent and understandable to all. We do not possess a conceptual framework in which a sort of unified religion can be designated or constructed of which the various religions of the world are concrete representations. Christians engage in communication with people of other beliefs and other fundamental life options as participants with their own background and horizon, side by side with other participants.

As a matter of fact, inter-religious communication itself confronts inclusivistic theologians with their own particular points of departure and makes them aware that they participate in such communication from a Christian perspective. Christians are already located, that is, have already adopted a position in the plural domain of inter-religious communication, and it is from this position, in the midst of other positions, that they should assess their necessarily inclusivistic dealings with others. Christians do not have a bird’s eye view that allows them to survey religious plurality as detached observers and grant it a place in light of its own truth. Indeed, Christianity’s own place in the midst of plurality is part of the picture. The “different inclusivism” to which we refer is conscious of the particularity of the Christian faith and brings it into the
communication, not in order to relativize its own position but rather to determine it in the plural inter-religious world. In the context of inter-religious communication, Christians will ultimately be confronted with their own specific way of speaking about reality. Unable to distance themselves from their particular options, presuppositions, terminology and conceptual schemes, Christians ultimately approach others with their own ‘baggage.’ An example is the universal salvific will of God, which explains why Christians tend to be so highly motivated in their engagement in inter-religious dialogue.

It is possible that the (modern/rational) notion that Christian believers can abstract themselves from their concrete rootedness in a tradition lies hidden behind the vision of certain theological pluralists, that Christians can adopt the position of detached observers, allowing them to make statements above and beyond the plural religious reality to which they then adapt their theology. In such a scenario, the truth of the Christian faith becomes dependent on a coordinating rational scheme that is able to locate all religions. Incidentally, an atheistic variant of such pluralism also exists. A number of atheistic scholars in religious studies, certainly those still profoundly impregnated with scientist ideals, likewise see themselves as observers located at a meta-level, elevated above the plurality of religions which they maintain they are free to judge. They forget, however, that as self-declared children of the Enlightenment they are a part of the plurality over which they judge and their atheistic position does not grant them the right to pretend otherwise.9

We can use an image to explain what we mean. Some present the various religions as a variety of different paths that lead to the same mountain-top engulfed in clouds. How can we verify such a hypothesis, however, if we only follow one of the said paths, namely the Christian one? Without a bird’s eye perspective on the religious reality it is impossible to legitimate the image. The experience of religious plurality and inter-religious communication reveal that the observer’s position is in fact unsustainable. We are all participants. We all follow our own path. We are aware that other paths exist that cross our own from time to time or run parallel with our path for a while only to go off in their own direction further down the line. We cannot confirm, however, that

all these paths actually lead to the same mountain-top. Indeed, it is equally possible that a path that disappears beyond the horizon and into the clouds leads to a different mountain-top. It is impossible to confirm this from the perspective of our own path and likewise impossible to deny it. We simply do not know. Nevertheless, we climb the mountain using our own path as mountain climbers and from time to time other paths cross our own. It is thus as mountain climbers that we enter into communication and as such we are able to exchange thoughts and customs, joys and concerns with others, rooted in our experience of the journey. A particular role is set aside in this endeavour for the imagination. Aware of the fact that we are participants, and learning about others in contact with the other, we are capable, to a degree, of changing our perspective, without revoking the irreducible otherness of the other in the process.

An inclusivistic perspective is thus—epistemologically speaking—unavoidable. The question posed by pluralistic theologians with respect to the relationship between Christian truth claims and the other religions remains a pressing one: how do we couple Christian identity to a fundamental respect for other religions? The practice of inter-religious communication would appear to have room for both, but how can we conceptualise this reality in theological terms? Is a sort of ‘pluralistic’ inclusivism possible?

In contrast to the classical inclusivistic position, this would imply that Christians must approach religious plurality from the perspective of participants. For them, the mystery of Christ constitutes the perspective from which they speak about religious salvation and truth, because they live in and from this truth. At the same time, the universal salvific will of God, which is revealed to them in Christ, provides the Christian point of cross-reference that inspires them to seek traces of goodness and truth in other religions. They can only follow one path at a time—trusting that all humanity is ultimately saved in Christ.

*The Truth of the Incarnation is the Incarnation of the Truth*

We noted above that the *incarnation* might signify more than the idea that truth is revealed in the particular, or in other words that the particular is the vessel of the universal. The truth of the incarnation indicates, rather, that the particular is constitutive of the truth by principle and is as such indispensable. The very particularity of the Christian tradition,
fruit of contingent histories and their interpretations, is not a contra-indication for its truth. Truth is concrete, incarnate, and can only be grasped as such. This means that when we speak of Jesus Christ, God’s Son made flesh, we cannot simply make a distinction between the divinity and humanity of Jesus, even though they do not coincide. God’s revelation is unthinkable without the human Jesus; the human Jesus is constitutive of what we know of Jesus as Christ, of Christian faith in him. It is in Jesus, in his concrete humanity, that God is revealed among human beings, the Jew from Nazareth who proclaimed the Kingdom of God in the language and narratives of his own day and put it into practice until he died on the Cross outside Jerusalem. It is of this same Jesus that his disciples confessed after his death that he had risen, that he was the Christ, God’s Son, in his humanity and not in spite of it. The one who desires to know God must look at Jesus. The first disciples expressed the results of their faith-inspired observation of Jesus in the New Testament, in the language and stories of their days—just as the faith communities that would follow them would be inspired time after time by these words. Moreover, Jesus Christ reveals God and God’s desire for human beings thanks to his humanity. Classical theology tends to explain this point in soteriological terms. Only if God has really become human, it is stated, can the human person really become God; it is only because God shared humanity to the full with us that we human beings are saved. At this juncture, however, we are emphasising the epistemological perspective, so the question is: what does it say about the truth unfolded in Christ? As we have already affirmed: the person who desires to know God must look at Jesus Christ, who, as a human person, definitively revealed God in history. At the same time, divine truth for Christians is also to be located in concrete events and narratives. It is only in the all-too-historical, the concrete, the contingent that God can become manifest, that God becomes manifest. This does not mean that God coincides with the concrete and the contingent, but that the concrete and the contingent make the manifestation of God possible; this manifestation is not in spite of but rather thanks to the concrete and the contingent. Every concrete encounter, no matter how accidental, every particular and contingent event, is the potential location of God’s manifestation. For Christians, God’s manifestation in Jesus Christ forms the hermeneutical key in this regard.
This is what the Christological doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon—Jesus Christ is at the same time both God and human—can mean for us today: God is manifest in Jesus Christ, not without Jesus’ humanity but in and through it; Jesus reveals God as a human person without thereby giving up his humanity. Jesus’ concrete words and deeds reveal God historically situated in a very specific context. Every actual statement about this God and this revelation must comply with the same rules of the game. Even today, it is only possible to give expression to God’s involvement in history and the world in all-too-human terms. Jesus’ particular humanity, concrete history and the events, narratives and conceptual frameworks thereof, do not represent a stumbling block on our journey to God; they represent the very possibility of the journey.\(^{10}\)

What we just have said, is in fact true of every human engagement with the Christian faith. It is only in the particular word, narrative, ritual and practice that the profound significance of the Christian faith can be revealed. Incarnation thus demands—formulated once again in technical terms—an ongoing *radical hermeneutics* in which the particular as possibility of divine revelation is taken seriously and at the same time relativized, since the particular never coincides with God, in the same way as God and humanity are united in a single person, undivided and undiluted. This is the core around which the Christian tradition turns: the tradition cannot be substituted nor can it be absolutized. It speaks of God—and without it there can be no talk about God—but it is not God. Where tradition is absolutized, it is precisely Godself who interrupts such rigidity and fosters recontextualization.\(^{11}\) There is no such thing as a core of truth that stands at our disposal, free of every form of media-

\(^{10}\) For an elaboration, see my: “Christus Postmodernus: an Attempt at Apophatic Christology,” in *The Myriad Christ: Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (BETL 152; ed. T. Merrigan and J. Haers; Leuven: Peeters Press, 2000), 577-593.

tion, which is given expression in ever-changing historical frameworks, as many classical hermeneutic theologians have argued. Every truth is constituted in part by the all-too-human, by concrete history and context. This does not do an injustice to such truth, since it is only thus, through time and history, that we can speak about God. It is likewise through this tradition that God speaks to Christians, embedded in the historical context of today, whereby the said tradition perpetuates and renews itself.

In conclusion: Christology, the theological understanding of Jesus Christ, is the cornerstone of all Christian theology and necessary for a clear understanding of what, in theological terms, is the truth. The all-too-human does not obstruct genuine Christian discourse about God and with God, it is the precondition thereof.

3. The Incarnation of Truth and the Hermeneutics of Religion

In this second part, we investigate in what way such a concept of theological truth, implying a radical theological hermeneutics, may assist a philosophical reflection about a contemporary hermeneutics of religion. Indeed, a wide range of philosophers belonging to the phenomenological and/or hermeneutical tradition—denoted as “continental philosophy” across the Atlantic—have placed the theme of religion on the philosophical agenda again, often in relation to their attempts to overcome ontotheology. Here, we briefly present some of the key thinkers engaged in this discussion, and subsequently contrast their philosophical hermeneutics of religion with the kind of radical hermeneutics which does not disregard the irreducible importance of particularity—the kind which resulted from our former fundamental-theological reflection on the epistemological relevance of incarnation in conceiving of theological truth in the midst of a plurality of religious truth claims.
Religious Hermeneutics and the Contamination of Language

Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of givenness,\textsuperscript{12} for instance, takes as its point of departure the \textit{saturated phenomenon} Marion considers the saturated phenomenon to be the prime instance, the paradigm, for speaking of reality as a whole—reality phenomenologically reduced then to “that which appears” as always and already given, as a gift. In phenomenological language, this implies that, for the subject in relation to what appears, the intuition is always greater than the intention, and supersedes the intentional dynamic of the knowing subject towards the phenomenon. The subject is bedazzled in and through the overwhelming intuition, and is therefore incapable of giving a clear and precise signification to the phenomenon. The subject is disarmed precisely with regard to his or her power to interpret and systematise the phenomenon. Instead of the nominative case, in which the subject’s mastery is acknowledged with regard to the interpretation and signification of the phenomenon, the subject is turned into the dative case. Therefore, the human response is always and already secondary, and consists in nothing more than this responding to the reception of oneself from givenness. This structure of appeal and response is, according to Marion, (a) given, and therefore prior to language and hermeneutics. Because of the dynamics of the appeal and the response, language looses its descriptive function and is reduced to its pragmatic function, merely pointing to an, in the end, ineffable givenness. For Marion, this dynamics of appeal and response also structures the nature of divine revelation, and the role of religious language. Therefore, it is not so much a hermeneutical approach to religion and religious language that teaches us how to understand (Christian) religion and religious truth, as a radicalised phenomenological approach: i.e., a phenomenology that serves as a heuristic, that is able to reduce particularity and language to its essential structure ("autant de reduction, autant de donation"—the more reduction the more givenness).\textsuperscript{13} Only insofar as a particular religious discourse expresses this universal structure is it discovered to be meaningful. The concrete discourse of this particular tradition is merely


\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, “‘Christian Philosophy’: Hermeneutic or Heuristic?,” in \textit{The Question of Christian Philosophy Today} (ed. F. Ambrosio; New York: Fordham University, 1999), 247-264.
pragmatic and performative: what is being said is ultimately of no importance; what is essential is that language as a whole expresses this universal structure of appeal and response.

Jean-Luc Marion’s position, which can be summarised as *phenomenology before hermeneutics* has been criticised by deconstructionist thinkers, such as Jacques Derrida and John Caputo, advocating a “radical hermeneutics of pure religion.” They contend that the reduction of reality to givenness cannot claim to be a thinking that itself would be exempted from the structure of language. The universal logic of being given (étant donné) is itself situated within discourse. Marion does not and cannot reach ‘beyond the text’ and would therefore seem to fall prey to the onto-theological schemes he wants to overcome. In order words, Marion’s attempt to overcome linguistic positioning is itself positioned. Derrida, on the other hand, tries to radicalise the hermeneutical turn of philosophy. For him, only a hermeneutics that deconstructs all signification to an originary differential space (différance), which is presupposed by and makes possible all discourse, is sufficiently radical. The later Derrida, emphatically accompanied by Caputo and others, expresses the dynamics of deconstruction, and the corresponding critical consciousness, in explicitly religious vocabularies. This results in a so-called *radical hermeneutics of religion* that seeks to determine the ‘religious’ in terms of ‘religion without religion’ which reduces religion to a universal structure of religious desire, conceived of as at the unreachable “other side” of language. As another way of expressing this structure of religious desire, Derrida and Caputo indicate the ‘messianic structure’ recognised in, but at the same time distinguished from the various particular messianisms. As a matter of fact, this radical hermeneutics results—at least in Caputo’s reception—in a kind of (philosophical) negative theology that expresses, beyond concrete discourse and particularity, a ‘religiously being related to’ that which lies at the ‘origin’ of every particular religious discourse, but is betrayed in every attempt to name it. Religion is reduced to a structure which ‘precedes’ and is ‘beyond’ particularity, thus becoming a ‘religion without religion’: ‘pure religion’—although impossible—before or beyond the contamination of language.

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It is Richard Kearney, an author who has difficulties deciding between a hermeneutical, phenomenological or deconstructionist approach, who has criticised the tendencies in Marion and Derrida/Caputo to conquer onto-theology with philosophical negative theology. In agreement with Paul Ricoeur, Kearney attempts to resist the ‘short-cut’ approaches of both phenomenology and deconstruction, and their respective negative-theological outcome. This outcome reduces the narrative thickness of religious reality to the rather meagre result of an unknowable and untouchable transcendence (which according to him might be divine as well as monstrous\(^{17}\)) in describing the depth-structure of religious realities. Kearney explicitly relates the constitution of signification to the long ‘detour’ of a hermeneutic of texts and, in so doing, points to the hermeneutical presuppositions of the short-cut approaches.\(^{18}\) On the other hand, differing from Ricoeur and relying on Caputo and Derrida, Kearney is more aware that his account is situated in a particular discourse and that his hermeneutic of religious texts, i.e., texts from the Jewish-Christian tradition, therefore entails a certain ‘wager.’\(^ {19}\) But, surprisingly enough, Kearney as well ultimately seems to consider

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\(^{16}\) Despite this passion, however, Caputo is also aware of the fact that neither Derrida nor he himself escapes from linguistic contamination. In the end, he avows that the distinction between the ‘messianic’ and the diverse messianisms “cannot be rigorously maintained . . . We are always involved with structures whose historical pedigree we can trace if we read them carefully enough, . . . That is no less true of deconstruction itself. . . . If we search it carefully enough, we discover that it, too, is another concrete messianism, which is the only thing liveable.” As for his own position, Caputo would concede that he practices a Christian deconstruction, but one “which is very closely tied to Jesus the Jew, the Judaism of Jesus”—before its integration in Christianity—cf. John D. Caputo, interviewed by B. Keith Putt, “What Do I Love when I Love my God? An Interview with John D. Caputo,” in Religion With/ out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo (ed. J.H. Olthuis; London: Routledge, 2001), 150-179, 165.


this narrativity to be a contamination of ‘pure’ religious desire, as does deconstruction, and still presupposes an underlying ‘quasi-universal’ religious-ethical anthropology, i.e. a kind of messianism without incarnation, as the goal of the hermeneutics of religion.²⁰ It would seem to follow that for Kearney religious traditions, in one way or another, share the ‘same’ caring for justice and peace, for human wholeness and fulfilment, and that they all convey narrative wisdom in order to realise this fulfilment. An exchange of readings of the different religious traditions, framed within a hermeneutics of religious toleration (i.e., a hermeneutic of tolerant and pluralist interpretations) may result in “suggestive intersections between the different wisdom traditions, given the insights of so many of the great spiritual mystics that God is ultimately one even as the ways to God are many.”²¹ Therefore, inter-religious communication should lead beyond differences in languages and histories (although not without them) to a communal understanding of the transcendent and a peaceful and tolerant living together. This is the reason why Kearney opposes the too explicit “confessionally partisan”²² truth claims of religions. Thus, in the end, language and narrativity differentiate and divide again. Religious truth is finally to be situated in what is radically beyond language, beyond narrativity, and hermeneutics becomes a tool to evoke and point at this beyond. Language risks contaminating the quasi-universal purity of an ethico-eschatological religious desire.

¹⁹ In The God Who May Be Kearney indeed develops what he coins, a “phenomenological-hermeneutical retrieval” and points at the importance of the “metaphorizing role of hermeneutic mediation” in understanding (Christian?) religion. To come to such an understanding, he engages in a reading of key texts from the biblical tradition, such as the ‘burning bush’ episode, the transfiguration narrative, etc. Cf. Richard Kearney, The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutic of Religion (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001).


²² Kearney, Strangers, Gods and Monsters, 41. For Kearney, the uniqueness and definitiveness of the fullness of God’s revelation in the Incarnation in Jesus Christ would qualify to be such a claim.
The Incarnation of Truth is the Truth of the Incarnation

It is not so much the fact that prominent philosophers still—or better yet, again—speak of God that matters to us here—although it surely is consonant with the revival of ‘the religious’ in contemporary Western societies. It is rather the manner in which they speak of God that is of importance to the theological reflection we undertake here. Although all, of course in their own voice, display a specific hermeneutical sensibility for particularity, they all also tend in practice to place the basic structure of religious truth claim outside or beyond particularity. In Marion’s case, this is quite evident: it is not the what of religious language, but the that which is essential. And contrary to appearances, the same thing is very much present in the works of Derrida and Caputo: religious truth appears to be entertained at the expense of, and certainly not thanks to, its rootedness in a particular discourse. It is above all the extent to which their accounts of religion remain dependent upon negative theology that is symptomatic. All of these philosophical negative theologies display a formal messianic structure that necessarily has to be kept open. Moreover, because of its incurable predicative nature, language is considered as a contamination, even as a betrayal of a kind of original religious purity. In concrete prayers, the purity of the religious address at work in ‘pure’ prayer cannot be maintained. Because of the fall of language, and into language, religious truth must be beyond language—even though both Caputo and Derrida would be the first to avow that, on the epistemological level, there is no ‘beyond language.’ Kearney, at least, would also stress the latter and propose a phenomenological-hermeneutical retrieval of religious texts to understand what religion is about. But in his case as well, hermeneutics ultimately leads away from particularity and the specific truth claims ventured in it.

However, is it legitimate to equate language with contamination? Since language seems to be our condition, does the irreducible particularity of religion contaminate the striving for religious purity? Is religious truth as such therefore impossible—or, to put it in the appropriate philosophical jargon: does religious truth essentially have to do with clinging ‘onto the impossibility of its possibility’? At least these questions challenge, from a fundamental theological perspective, the impor-

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23 For a reflection on this situation and the epistemological consequences for a theology of culture, see my: God Interrupts History. Theology in a Time of Upheaval (New York: Continuum, 2007), chapter 7.
tance of the incarnation as the theological-epistemological category par excellence for naming God and thinking about religious truth. From this perspective, the question is then: is Christianity, with its christocentric and thus incarnational approach, not doomed to be always too particular, too contingent, too historical, too positive?

Nevertheless, it also works the other way around, challenging current philosophical hermeneutics of religion to reflect on a hermeneutics in which religious truth is resolutely thought of from its irreducible bond to language and particularity. The *truth of the incarnation* is that language is not a contamination of religious truth but its very condition. Without language there is no religion, and no religious truth. At the same time, as we have seen in the first part, conceiving of religious truth (and its irreducible link to the particularity of language) in terms of incarnation, forces a contemporary philosophical approach to religion to take into account a dynamic and radical hermeneutics which qualifies, from the very outset, each religious truth claim. As a theological and epistemological concept, incarnation supposes a radical and never-ending hermeneutics which deals with the very particularity of religious language, religious traditions and their ongoing interpretations, and which does not aspire to overcome particularity, whether one succeeds in such an attempt (Marion), or not (Derrida). As a matter of fact, in their own way, all of the philosophers we have discussed have presented a (in theological terms) pluralist hermeneutics of religion. Such a position, as we have analysed, does not succeed in respecting the truth claims of particular religions. A radical hermeneutics which starts with particularity, then, would seem to be able to avoid both universalism without particularity, and closed particularism. In conclusion, (philosophical) negative theology should not constitute an attempt to escape from the linguistic character of religious truth, but assist in taking it maximally into account.

**4. Conclusion**

Christians today are being challenged by religious plurality. In the context of inter-religious communication, they are being called upon to simultaneously respect their own truth claims together with the truth claims of others. Rooted in their own Christian background, they involve themselves as participants in a dialogue that need not necessarily
lead to greater unity—the conceptualisation and understanding of points of difference is already a major step in the right direction. As conscious participants, Christians are well advised not to misjudge the particularity of their own position as something that is necessarily surpassed by the truth claim of Christianity, nor as something that discredits this truth claim in advance, but rather as irreducibly constitutive of the truth of the Christian faith. Neither the inclination to universalise the truth claim (exclusivism and inclusivism) nor the pluralistic negation thereof (pluralism) are of much use in this respect. It is precisely in the combination of maintaining both their particularity and their truth claim that Christians are able to enter into inter-religious dialogue, looking forward to the moment when Jesus Christ reveals himself in such dialogue, as he continues to do so “in the least of these . . .” Moreover, from such a concept of truth in terms of incarnation, they are able to position themselves in the philosophical debate about religion. At the same time, they can question too facile usages of negative theology which are called upon in this debate. For religious truth does not lead us beyond particularity, but is constituted by it: the truth of the incarnation is the incarnation of the truth.

Indeed, from the confrontation with religious diversity, theology can rediscover the pertinence of this thesis. In considering the question of religious truth from a theological perspective, one cannot deny the epistemological consequences of the incarnation in Jesus Christ: it is in this concrete human being that God is revealed definitively, not without, but thanks to his being a human being. The consciousness of this dynamics leads to a radical theological hermeneutics which takes into account this historical-contingent particularity: although God as such never coincides with this particularity, God can no longer be thought of without this particular history.

On the other hand: the incarnation of the truth is also the truth of the incarnation. It is here that a theological concept of religious truth may contribute to the turn to religion in contemporary continental philosophy. The linguistic character of religious truth then does not constitute a fall or a contamination, which in the end renders religious truth impossible and leads the philosophical hermeneutics of religious particularity in the direction of an untenable ‘moment of pure religion.’ On the contrary, a hermeneutics of religion does not lead beyond language, but to language itself: to the contingent histories, practices, texts, to concrete traditions and their interpretations. It is there that religious believers dis-
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cover the reason and content of their religious truth claims, and it is thanks to the consciousness of this particularity that they, as participants, can introduce these claims in ongoing inter-religious conversations.
For a long time—perhaps starting from the famous meeting in Davos in 1929—hermeneutics and the philosophy of science which derived from Neo-positivism and focused especially on exact and natural sciences followed separate ways. The crisis of the Neo-empiricist conception, though, brought some changes. The recovery of Duhem's holism, the focusing on the 'implicit' and 'tacit' components present in the cognitive process, Quine's rejection of the dogmas of analyticity and reductionism, Sellars' criticism of the myth of the datum, the overcoming of the distinct