

**An Interview with Lieven Boeve
“Recontextualizing the Christian
Narrative in a Postmodern Context”**

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JPS: To orient our exchange, I would like to ask a few general questions about the context of your work and your, so to speak, intellectual conversation partners. At the Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven you coordinate a research group titled “Theology in a Postmodern Context.” The stated aim of the group is “to engage, from a fundamental theological perspective, with the challenges posed by the present context of plurality and difference, and to consider its consequences for Christian faith.” To define the “postmodern context” you seem to draw primarily on the work of philosophers, especially on the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard. What are the benefits and hazards of an appropriation by theologians of philosophical insights? Must theologians rely on philosophers to determine the context of their work?

LB: Many questions at the same time! The research group officially started in 2000 when four research projects were granted to me and scholars associated with me (cf. <http://www.theo.kuleuven.be/ogtpc/>). But already years before I started a reflection on the way in which theology was challenged by contemporary postmodern philosophy. For my own work, indeed, this concerned a study of J.-F. Lyotard, J. Habermas, Richard Rorty and later also work of J. Derrida, J.-L. Marion, R. Kearney and others. Other members of the group also investigate the challenges put by other thinkers to Christian faith and theology, such as Th. Adorno, S.

Zizek, G. Vattimo, K. Hart, J. Caputo, E. Levinas, J.-Y. Lacoste, etc. or draw on other resources from the humanities and even the natural sciences. These thinkers or resources are always studied with a *fundamental-theological* question at the background: how do they challenge today’s Christian theological reflection on God, religion, human beings, history and world? How do they qualify the context in which Christian faith exists and from which this faith develops its self-understanding? And finally: can they assist theology to come to a renewed understanding of what Christianity is about – an understanding which possesses both contextual and theological plausibility? Philosophy is at the service of theology, both *challenging* its shape and *sustaining* its project.

But at the same time, in as much as theology engages the discussion on contemporary critical consciousness, it contributes to this very discussion, answering from this resulting renewed self-understanding the questions coming from the contextual critical consciousness under discussion.

As a matter of fact, it is, among others, the German philosopher of religion Richard Schaeffler (Tübingen), especially in his *Religion und kritische Bewußtsein* (1973), who taught me that there is an intrinsic link between the critical consciousness of religion (and thus of Christian theology as a reflection on Christian faith) and the contemporary philosophical critical consciousness. Only from an intensive and continuous dialogue can religion and theology hold to and sharpen their own critical consciousness (and the same holds true for philosophy in relation to religion). Schaeffler argued already in 1973 (years before, e.g., the publication of Jean-François Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne*) that philosophy has become conscious of the crisis of modern rationality, and can be considered a contemporary critical consciousness in as much as it reflects on this crisis, not to overcome it all too easily, but to learn to deal with it as constitutive for rationality today. From the dialogue with

such philosophical critical consciousness, according to Schaeffler, theology could test and express its own ability to deal with the crisis at the heart of the Christian religion, stemming from the non-identity between God and history/world, while at the same time this God is only revealed in and known from this history/world.

Such a view, stressing the hermeneutical, dialectical and historical nature of theology's reflection on Christian faith in relation to its context, was very much in agreement with the hermeneutical-theological methodology of the Flemish Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx, professor of systematic theology in Nijmegen (The Netherlands), which was prominent when I studied theology in Leuven. Building on this view, while radicalizing the inherent insight of the intrinsic link between tradition development and context, I elaborated a concept of "recontextualization" to understand both how Christian tradition has developed through the ages, and how theology should relate to the challenges of the contemporary context, and thus of the critical consciousness conveyed in current philosophy, the sciences, the arts, etc.

As a theological category, recontextualization implies that Christian faith and tradition are not only contained in a specific historico-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political context, but are also co-constituted by this context. For sure, faith cannot be reduced to context, nor can tradition development to mere adaptation to the context. Nevertheless, there is an intrinsic bond between faith and tradition, on the one hand, and context, on the other. Hence, contextual novelty puts pressure on historically conditioned expressions of faith and their theological understanding, and drives towards recontextualization. In both taking part in, and confronting itself with this changed context, Christian communities may find new ways to express their faith, in fidelity to the tradition as well as to the context in which they are situated – balancing between continuity and discontinuity. The concept of recontextualization thus functions both

descriptively and normatively. As a *descriptive* category, it assists to analyze the ways in which tradition has been challenged by contextual change and novelty – varying from stubborn condemnation and suppression of this novelty to its uncritical embracing and adaptation. As a *normative* category, recontextualization calls for a theological program, in which the insight in the intrinsic link between faith and context inspires theologians to take the contextual challenges seriously, in order to come to a contemporary theological discourse which at the same time can claim theological validity and contextual plausibility. From this follows that a theological recontextualization for today implies a thorough study of the current critical consciousness, characteristic for a context which already for more than two decades is qualified as "postmodern."

So, indeed, there is an intense dialogue with philosophy, social science, etc, going on in the research of our group but always from a theological angle, with as its aim to come to a renewed self-understanding which can engage, from its own Christian-theological perspective, in the discussion about God, human beings, history and the world.

JPS: At the heart of your work is a conception of theology, of *fides quaerens intellectum*, as a radical hermeneutics. The radicality of this critical-hermeneutical theology resides, in part, in the fact that it accepts what you frequently refer to as the particularity of the Christian tradition. This tradition – I should say "traditions" – is a paradigm of what you call an *open narrative*, a narrative that witnesses to the Other (God; the excluded and ignored; the stranger and the poor, etc.) and that is continually interrupted by the Other. – I would like to ask you about the origin and meaning of some of these terms and claims.

LB: The exercise to take the challenges of contemporary philosophy seriously indeed has driven me to recontextualizing Christian

tradition as an open narrative and theology as a radical hermeneutics.

First, where does the concept of the “open narrative” come from? The criticism of the modern and postmodern master narratives by Jean-François Lyotard has made me very conscious that in the very structure of identity-constituting narratives hegemonizing tendencies are at work, attempting to master and secure this identity. Narratives all too easily forget the “*differend*,” the otherness appearing at the border of every identity constitution, both enabling and limiting it. And because of this forgetting, narratives often have victimized this otherness, and caused the many victims of history. Certain views of Christian tradition and faith indeed could be analyzed as master narratives, or at least as not wary enough of the creeping totalizing tendencies. Nevertheless, and this is a point which is not so much elaborated in Lyotard (but has been reminded to us by authors like Paul Ricoeur), we keep on constituting identity, we cannot but tell narratives. Therefore, the criticism of the grand narratives should not be directed against the narrative as such, but against the forgetting of these hegemonizing tendencies – that which makes of narratives closed master narratives. In the same way as Lyotard perceives the task of philosophy (and the arts) to bear witness to (the forgetting of) the *differend*, I suggested that there still may be other discourses, narratives, which must be able to foster a critical self-understanding, a consciousness which does not allow us to forget too easily this forgetting. Instead of master narratives, they then could be conceived of as *open narratives*: narratives which in the way in which they are told – in which they are structured – both remain conscious of the closing tendencies at work in them and bear witness to the otherness which at the same time enables and limits the very narrative. For me, the Christian tradition could be such an open narrative, and this on theological grounds: because of the otherness of God, both constitutive for, and limiting the Christian narrative. In the way in which the Christian narrative is told, this critical

consciousness should be operative. The Christian narrative bears witness to God who as the other of this narrative interrupts the course of the narrative where it tends to close in upon itself.

Indeed, I have tried to show that, when theology confronts itself with this conceptuality of the open narrative, and its inherent criticism of master narratives, theology *not only on contextual grounds* should take its lessons to heart. Moreover, it is challenged *on theological grounds* to recontextualize Christian faith into a Christian open narrative – resulting in a theology of the open narrative. For this conceptuality of the open narrative not only offers a contextually plausible opportunity for recontextualizing theology, but also assists to come to a theological self-understanding, nurtured by faith and tradition itself. It is at this point, that I have dealt with a reading of Scripture using the “open narrative” as a reading key. At many instances, it can be shown that, e.g., Jesus, when confronted with closed narratives, is opening them on God’s behalf; that the Jesus-narrative itself is told as a narrative opened by God in the resurrection; and that the testimony to God’s interrupting action in Jesus and in history is given, in Scripture and tradition, in the modus of an open narrative.

And here, secondly, theology – as the reflexive expression of the critical consciousness of Christian faith – indeed is redefined as a *radical hermeneutics* of God’s interrupting action in history, continuing the hermeneutic labor Christians throughout history, in rereading Scripture and tradition in relation to their contexts, have done. I deliberately have chosen the notion “radical theological hermeneutics.” First of all, it expresses my conviction that only a fundamentally hermeneutical approach to Christianity may contribute to an understanding of what is going on in Christian faith – in full respect of the hermeneutical circle by which Christian faith operates. Understanding Christian faith necessitates a taking a distance from within the very involvement in it. Of course, I am

very much aware that some usages of “radical” these days indeed favor what some would call a (closed) cultural-linguistic approach, not allowing for “external criticism.” But there should be no mistake here: the very concept of recontextualization that is at the back of this radical theological hermeneutics (of the Christian *open* narrative), resists such closure. On the other hand, others would use “radical hermeneutics” to name some deconstructionist attempts to strive at as much “openness” as possible, reducing the *narrative*, the very particularity of the Christian tradition. For them, language would primarily be contamination to be relativized in view of a “religion without religion”, “prayer without prayer”. This has resulted in kinds of apophatic theology (which on closer inspection may well reflect on a speculative level the resurgence of religiosity in the West). Both types of so-called “radical” thinking at the same time point at insights which the radical hermeneutics I propose needs to incorporate: the irreducibility of particular narrativity as well as the radical challenge of otherness enabling and limiting this narrativity. At the same time, however, they are not radical enough, because they ultimately do not hold to the radical tension an open narrative lives from: narratives close in upon themselves without openness to the *differend* while at the same time there is no openness without particular narrativity. Both these insights are needed to prevent from falling back into master narratives.

It is at this point that I would claim that a recontextualized radical-hermeneutical reading of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation helps theologians to take a stance in the philosophical discussion about religion (which has become very prominent because of the so-called theological turn in continental phenomenology and hermeneutics). The doctrine of Chalcedon – Jesus Christ is one person in two natures: God and human – holds then that 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 the journey to God, they represent the very possibility of the journey. So doing, particularity and narrativity are neither to be absolutized nor reduced, because from within the very narrativity itself God is revealed as its condition and limit.

JPS: Does recognition of the particularity of the Christian tradition amount to an affirmation of fideism? That is, are “particular” traditions incommensurable, to use the Kuhnian term?

LB: The acknowledgement of the very irreducible particularity of the Christian tradition runs indeed the risk of particularism, especially when it forgets the critical dynamics at the heart of this Christian narrative because of its bearing witness to God as the Other of this narrative – known to us through this narrative but never to be reduced to it. Precisely this internal tension does not allow for static conceptions of narrativity, but involves a dynamical view in which encounters and conflicts with other narratives, individual as well as communal, engender processes of exchange, learning, conflict and confrontation. The consciousness of the otherness of the other may serve a coming to a better self-understanding, an understanding of the possible *differend* between two narratives as well as awake an “analogical” imagination, not to overcome the *differend* but to deal with it from one’s own narrative on. The incommensurability of traditions not necessarily should be conceived of as a static given, blocking encounter and communication. The

confrontation with otherness with the same right may generate processes of recontextualisation, and inspire attempts to live together in difference.

JPS: How would you link – or distance -- your claim that Christianity is an *open narrative* to/from the deconstructive insight that underneath the seeming unity of any narrative or tradition lies plurivocity and multiplicity?

LB: Indeed, the insight that Christianity is an open narrative also makes us alert for too easy appeals to, or claim of, unity. Such appeals often betray the hegemonizing tendencies at work in master narratives. Especially these views which then are claiming to stand for this unity or would be able to attest this unity, fall prey to this. However, it seems to me that there is at an ambiguity in certain deconstructionist accounts of religion (in terms of “religion without religion”). They would seem to foster – insidiously and mostly quite contrary to their ambition – a new way of thinking the unity of religious traditions and narratives, by reducing the narrativity of these traditions to the structure of religious desire (“prayer without prayer”, the distinction between messianicity and messianisms, etc.). So doing these accounts seem to focus too much on the “openness” to the *differend* and undervalue too rapidly the very narrativity and particularity which is equally constitutive of the plurivocity and multiplicity as the *differend* or otherness they are bearing witness to. At the same time, this implies that accounts of messianicity are messianisms in their own right, to be read, respected and criticized, from within their own narrativity and context.

JPS: I would now like to shift our focus onto the social and political elements and implications of your work. Communities organized around open narratives are best suited, I think, to democracy. Democratic mechanisms for preventing oppression – periodic elections,

deliberative legislative decision-making, judicial review, etc. – would discourage a community from closing itself, as it were, and believing that it alone embodied the general will. How would a postmodern political theology contribute to or function in democracy?

LB: It would seem that democracy indeed would allow for open narratives to live together in difference. Of course, this does not lead to a society without conflict or confrontation, because of the dynamic nature of open narratives, their competing and irreducible truth claims and so on. On the contrary, precisely the insight in this dynamic reality fosters a realistic-pragmatic view on politics as well as a critical stance. First of all, it teaches – and also Lyotard would state this – that politics as such should never become a narrative in its own right, but should continue to open the field upon which different discourse and narratives are striving to cope with each other. This implies that these narratives, be they religious or not, which usurp the political field are in fact master narratives. At the same time, however, in as much as this field is not an empty one, but colored by concrete narratives and their histories, democracy as the outcome of the dealings of these specific narratives on the political field involves a certain narrativity which both puts limits to these dealings, as well as it is often object of these dealings.

The reception of such thinking patterns in a Christian political theology radicalizes the refusal to identify history with salvation history (and thus re-introduces the eschatological reserve), and to usurp the plurality of discourses from a Christian theological meta-narrative. At the same time, it mobilizes critical forces against all discourses and narratives that forget about their own hegemonic tendencies and that result in victimizing others. In line with Johann-Baptist Metz’ late-modern political theology, a postmodern political theology, thus, is challenged by the appeal of the poor and the others.

JPS: Finally, I would like to ask you to elaborate on your reflections on the truth of religious claims. In *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Postmodern Context* (2003) you write that religious truth claims do not, or rather should not, have the pretense of being “all-encompassing” or some how “objective.” In that work you write, “Truth is a matter of relating appropriately to the intangible Truth, of giving witness to this Truth in the full awareness that it is ultimately inexhaustible, incomprehensible and inexplicable” (p. 99).

LB: This concept of truth, of course, relates to the concept of what an open narrative is. In such a narrative, truth claims will be marked by the tension between openness and narrativity. Therefore, they are irreducibly bound to the living of and from this concrete narrativity, as well as never being fully identified with it. As far as the Christian narrative is concerned, this is, as already hinted at, most prominently shown in the doctrine of incarnation: the person who desires to know God must look to Jesus Christ who, as a human person, definitively revealed God in history. It is only in the all-too-historical, the concrete, the accidental that God can become manifest, that God becomes manifest. This does not mean that God coincides with the concrete and the accidental, but that the concrete and the accidental make the manifestation of God possible, not in spite of but rather thanks to the concrete and the accidental. 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.

In theology, especially the discussion of the plurality of religions, the way in which this affects the Christian truth claim has put the question of theological truth on the agenda. Whereas in the theological strategies of exclusivism and inclusivism Christianity is universalised (Christian faith

is the one and only truth), theological pluralism particularises Christianity (Christian faith is (only) one perspective on or part of a greater truth). In this debate the radical hermeneutical approach of a Christian open narrative would criticise the epistemological observer’s position which is claimed by all three theological strategies and advocate for a reflective participant’s perspective. This would result in a kind of “different inclusivism” which is conscious of the particularity of the Christian faith and brings it into the discussion, not in order to relativize its own position but rather to determine it in the plural inter-religious world. At the same time, this participant’s perspective does qualify the truth claims of one’s own position, and makes room for the challenge of other truth claims, although they necessarily will be perceived from one’s own perspective. For Christians, the mystery of Christ constitutes then the perspective from which they speak about religious salvation and truth, because they live in and from this truth. Just as 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.

JPS: On what projects/topics are you currently working?

LB: I would like to edit two monographs in the coming years. The first would be on the discussion with philosophical critical consciousness which lead to the concept of the open narrative, and the recontextualisation of theology into a theology of the open narrative, or, in other words, a theology of interruption (working title: *Naming God in Open Narratives*). Secondly, I am working on a volume (for now in Dutch, later to be translated in English) on theological method, which tries to overcome the anti-modern and modern theological divide, in between the presumption of continuity between Christian faith and contemporary context of a lot of modern theology, and the presumption of

discontinuity, guiding many anti-modern theologies (working title: *God Interrupts History*).

At the same time I am collaborating with our Leuven mega-project on “Orthodoxy: Process and Product”, which engages a church-historical and

systematical-theological study of the determination of truth in church and theology (<http://www.theo.kuleuven.be/goa>).

And when I would find some more time, I would like to go deeper into the discussion of the “radical theological hermeneutics” I proposed.