What moved the early Christians in the essence of their beings? To answer this, Gerd Theissen presents and analyses the primitive Christian faith through the eyes of Science of Religion. It is not his intention to merely describe the New Testament Theology or to confessionally profess the faith of early Christians, but to render understandable the power of such faith in the life and context of Antiquity. Theissen has two goals: first, he searches the life of the primitive Christianity and makes his theological statements explicit by means of semiotic, psychological, and historical analysis. Thus, faith, worship, and the ethos of the Primitive Church are visible through the categories of Science of Religion. Second, he shows how the primitive Christianity evolved from Judaism and created an autonomous religious symbolic universe with an extraordinary dynamism to build communities, and that has changed the known world of the time.

Why a theory of primitive Christian religion? Why not a “theology of the New Testament” in order to present a resumed description of the first Christians’ faith?

As we know, “theology” can be read in both a descriptive and a confessional sense. The concept “theology of the New Testament” is used descriptively when it means an analysis of all the statements in the New Testament that speak of God, or of the world and human beings in their relationship to God, without attributing a normative claim to such statements. The way I see it, such a descriptive theology is not apt to apprehend the whole dynamic of primitive Christian belief. In order to find out the first Christians’ innermost motivations we must investigate the whole of their lives and put their theological statements in semiotic, social, psychological and historical contexts which are not directly “theological”. The dynamic of primitive Christian faith is rooted in the dynamic of life.

At first glance, a “theology” in the confessional sense comes much closer to this dynamic. In fact, it is “confessional” because it starts from the premise that this faith has normative force and power even today. Consequently, it tends to assume that faith had this power also at the time of its origins. However, we must be clear: anyone who begins an account of the first Christians from the normative premise that “God redeemed the world in Christ and brought human life to its fulfilment” runs the risk of barring many secularised contemporaries from the New Testament. In doing so, one removes the centre of primitive Christian life from general discussion.
and engages it in a Christian internal debate. A theory of primitive Christian religion seeks to describe and explain primitive Christian faith in its dynamic that governs the whole of life in general religious categories the. Is seeks to allow a twofold reading of this faith: a view from inside and a view from outside – and above all, mediation between these two perspectives.

Now, in the scholarly study of religion there is a dispute as to what religion really is. The following definition cannot claim to be nor does it seek to be the only possible definition. On the contrary, it is not at the extremes of the spectrum of possible definitions.

2 The programme for an analysis of the primitive Christian religion goes back to William Wrede, Über Aufgabe

1. The withdrawal from the normative intention of religious texts. Their “intention” becomes the object, but not the analysis’ assumption. The primitive Christianity’s analysis occurs in a way that is “open to identities” (that is, it is accessible to people from several religious identities) and “open to applications” (that is, independently from the applicability of results in the ecclesial praxis).

2. The overcoming of the canon’s limits. All primitive Christian literature, more or less until irinæus, is included in the research, the reason by which the rigid delimitation between primitive Christianity and Ancient Church is put into question. In principle, canonical and non-canonical literatures have the same value.

3. The disengagement of categories “orthodoxy” and “heresy”: in principle, all Christian primitive trends have the same rights. In an overstated way, orthodoxy is considered the “imposed heresy”. Three further determinations express, in a more positive way, that which such analysis of primitive Christianity strives to reach from Sciences of Religion.

4. The acknowledgment of the plural and controversial features of theological schemes in primitive Christianity. There is no need to elaborate a unitary kerigma from the primitive Christian writings, although the issue of unity remains a legitimate concern under the perspective of history and Sciences of religion (and, in no way, only theological): the theory of primitive Christian religion assumed here questions more intensively the unity in diversity than the programmatic acknowledgment of plurality allows to suppose.

5. The interpretation of theological ideas from its real vital context. Religion does not consist (only) of thoughts, but is the expression of the whole of life. Religious ideas are the expression of religious and social experiences – and, in any case, also conditioned by non-religious factors. Thus, they are also included in the analysis of the political and social conditionings.

6. Openness before the history of religion: the primitive Christian religion shall be seen in its interaction with other religions – especially as a stream deriving from Judaism and marked by the confrontation with pagan religions. These other religions will be presented with no depreciation, thus not from the point of view of a pre-established superiority of primitive Christianity. Furthermore, the consciousness regarding the superiority of Jews and Christians in the pagan world demands an explanation.

There is no finished plan of such analysis of the primitive Christianity from Sciences of religion. One thing should be clear: an initiative of that nature gives large margin to several concepts. The present attempt likely distinguishes itself for (1) the use of theological models, even though they have only a functional role. I name them by means of stereotyped expressions: religion as sign language, its command by means of implicit axioms, its autonomy as a self-organized system, the re-elaboration of cognitive dissonances in religion, millenarism’s reaction to the conflict of the autochthonous culture with the imperial cultures, the theoretical-conflicting interpretation of the ethics as the expression of a overcoming of the fight through the distribution of opportunities of life, the theories of the ritual liminariness with the necessary breakage of taboos. All these theories or principles of theories are not apt to elaborate a general theory of religion, but to present the beginnings of a concrete religion in accessible general categories. (2) More strongly than in other projects, religion will be understood as a normative vital power; the possible appearance of a canon (thus, a collection of writings with authoritative intentions) has an important role to this “theory of the primitive Christian religion”. Consequently, we shall give great important to the issue of the unity of the primitive Christian religion (regarding the grammar of its sign language).
Religion is a cultural sign language which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality.3

The first part of the definition says what religion is, namely a cultural sign language. Thus it says something about the essence of religion. The second part says what religion brings about: a gain in life. That says something about its function. The definition leaves open whether and in what sense there is an ultimate reality. For the statement that religion promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality merely takes up the way in which the religions understand themselves; but it does not demand that anyone adopt this understanding.

The “essence” of religion: religion as a cultural sign system

Let us approach the first part of the definition, which concerns the essence of religion. Its specification as a cultural sign language contains three characteristics: religion has a semiotic, a systemic, and a cultural character.

First of all, religion is a semiotic phenomenon. In saying this we differ from other definitions of religion. We do not affirm it is the experience of the holy. Nor do we say it is a human projection. We say it is an objective sign system. What does that mean? The human being cannot exist in his environment as he finds it. He must change it. He does so, on the one hand, by work and technology, and, on the other, by systems of interpretation: by common sense in everyday life; by science, culture and religion in specialized fields of life. By work and interpretation human beings make their world a habitable home. The transformation of the world through interpretation does not take place through causal interventions in nature as in work and technology, but through “signs”, that is, through material elements which as signs create semiotic relations to something specific. Such signs and sign systems do not alter the specific reality, but our cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic relationships to it: they increase our attention, coherently organize our impressions, and link them with our behaviours. Only in a world interpreted in this way can we live and breathe.4

So what is the special feature of the religious sign system? It is characterized by the combination of three forms of expression that are thus combined only in religion: myth, rites and ethics. Let us briefly explain each of these forms of expression.5

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3 The definition of religion as (1.) a cultural sign system (2.) corresponding to an ultimate reality and (3.) promising the gain in life is influenced by Clifford Geertz in: Religion als kulturelles System, in: id., Dichte Beschreibung, Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1983, 44-95 = English edition: “Religion As a Cultural System”, in: The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books 1973, 87-125, here, p. 90. According to him, religion is a “a system of symbols that establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”. This definition could be resummed simplified in two points:

1. Instead of a system of symbols, I speak of a sign system, since “symbols”, in a restricted sense (like the cross) are just a especially complex form of signs, while imperatives such as “Thou shall not kill” are surely language “signs”, but not “symbolic” (in strict sense):
2. The formulation “corresponding to an ultimate reality” sums up the differentiated description of the moods and motivations as an organization of existence reputed as factual.
3. Add to this a practical reason: religion promises a gain in life, that is, right, conservation or improvement of life.

4 Such understanding of the human being as an animal symbolicum that transforms the world in his home by the interpretation associated to signs e found in Ernst Cassirer, Was ist der Mensch? Versuch einer Philosophie der menschlichen Kultur, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1960.

5 Religion’s three forms of expression are defined according to Fritz Stolz, Grundzüge der Religionswissenschaft, KVR 1527, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1988, 79-81: He distinguishes “possibilities of representation” or “possibilities of codification” of religious messages in the scope of doing, seeing and speaking: thus,
Myths explain in narrative form what fundamentally determines the world and life. Most of the time they express the behaviour of several gods in a primal time or a scatological time which is remote from the present inhabited world. In the biblical tradition a change soon took place here: the myth of the fundamental acts of God was extended through history to the present; it became a historical salvific narrative which also involves History. At the same time, the narrative about many gods became the narrative about the one and only God, who has only one social partner, the people of Israel as the representative of all mankind. In primitive Christianity we find a continuation of this development: a myth links itself with a concrete history in the midst of time. One individual from the people of Israel becomes the centre of all events. A theory of primitive Christian religion must explain this unique link between myth and history.

Rites are recurrent patterns of behaviour which, patterns with which people interrupt their everyday actions in order to depict the other reality that is indicated in myths. According to an ancient division (Plutarc, Is 3.68) they include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praxeological</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Linguistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Religion's praxeological and material forms of expression are synthesized here as ritual forms of expression: Eucharist and altar complement themselves. Linguistic forms of expression appear as myths, but they can continue to evolve and become theology and reflection. The ethics is considered a distinct form of expression — in consonance with the great importance is has in the Jewish-Christian tradition.

6 In my opinion, one must distinguish three dimensions of myth: it is a text, a power that models life, and a structure of thought. The theories about myth do not contradict one another provided they focus in one of these dimensions, respectively:

1. Myth is a text: a narrative that deals with a decisive time for the world, in which numinous subjects (gods, angels and demons) transform (or will transform) an unstable object of reality into a stable one. On this, see Fritz Stolz, “Der mythische Umgang mit der Rationalität und der rationale Umgang mit dem Mythos”, in: Hans H. Schmid (ed.), Mythos und Rationalität, Gütersloh: Mohn 1988, 81-106.

2. Myth has a function: it is a narrative with a legitimating or utopian force that grounds a form of social life or questions it (as in several scatological myths). Functionalism investigated this aspect of myth. Cf. Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology, New York 1926 = Westport, Conn.: University Press 1971.

3. Finally, the myth is a mentality or structure of thought: myths are narratives in whose base there is another way of conceiving the universe in forms of perception and explaining it according to certain categories. In that sense, they are not in opposition to the logos, but are a first form of logos. Cf. Ernst Cassirer, Philosophie der symbolischen Formen II. Das mythische Denken, 1925 = Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1958.

In the scope of the forms of conception of space and time, it is typical of the myth its structuring by means of the opposition between the holy and the secular: there is a holy centre of the world, a definitive holy time (or holy places and times) — always counterposed to secular space and time. Among the categories of thought with which the notions of space and time are arranged, these are the most important ones:

(a) A notion of substance according to which things seem animated: consequently, the first category of the mythical thought is animation. The mythical universe is a world of wills and intentions that act in all things. The world's hostility, for example, is personified and animated – and then represented by the figure of Satan and his demons. (cf. Aleida e Jan Assmann, Art. Mythos, HRWG IV: 1998, 179-200, p. 191).

(b) A notion of causality that also leads to a continual production of something similar: a person's individual sin happens not only analogously to Adam's sin, but is caused by this sin. Causality by analogy is a second basic category of the mythical thought.

(c) A notion of relation in which a deep identity is possible between things and people that seem clearly different in our everyday perceptions: for example, Adam's guilt is repeated in each person. Each person is Adam. On this way or thinking in terms of deep identity, see especially Gerhard Sellin, Mythologeme und mythische Züge in der paulinischen Theologie”, in: Hans H. Schmid (ed.), Mythos und Rationalität, Gütersloh: Mohn 1988, 209-233.

As a whole, the main structures of thought may be thus summed up:

**Forms of conception:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space:</th>
<th>Holy space</th>
<th>Secular space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time:</td>
<td>Holy time</td>
<td>Secular time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categories of thought:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Substantiation: Animation: all things work in a personified way</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Causality: Causality by analogy: a similar thing is produced successively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Relation: Deep identity: deep inside, the non-similar is identical</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

• Words of interpretation (lego, mena)
• Behaviors (drw, mena)
• Objects (deiknu, mena)

In the words of interpretation, the myth is made present in concentrated form. Through them behaviors take on symbolic surplus value and as signs are related to the “other reality”. Due to this “surplus value” the objects present in the rite are removed from everyday, secular use – including the places and buildings in which the rites take place. A theory of primitive Christian religion has to do with a great rupture in the ritual forms of religious symbolic expression. At that time – in different ways in Judaism and Christianity (and also in philosophy) – the traditional ritual actions (bloody animal sacrifices) were replaced by new (bloodless) rites. Traditionally holy objects like the temple lost their “holiness”. But above all, a paradoxical new behaviour developed between ritual actions and their interpretations: in fact, the first Christians developed a religious sign system without a temple, without a victim, without priests, and, in contradiction to the facts they kept these traditional elements of religious sign systems in their interpretations – often even in an archaic form which was already obsolete at that time. They ceased to sacrifice animals, but in their interpretations they reactivated a form of sacrifice which was already long obsolete, namely human sacrifice – as the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

Finally, ethics is part of the religious sign language. Or more precisely, the ethical behaviour can be integrated into religious sign language in different degrees. In Judaism, this integration was coherently carried out. All moral norms and values were summed up in the Torah. The everyday ethic of wisdom was just as much a part of the Torah as the prophets who were regarded as interpreters of the Torah. And the law, too, was completely permeated by theonomous elements – precisely at those points where it became an ethic which escaped human controls and sanctions. In other words, the one and only God rules the whole of life by his will. All behaviour gained a semiotic surplus value of meaning by being related to God’s commandment and history. It was not only a question of good or bad behaviour, but it was a behaviour impelled by unconditional divine commandments and sanctioned by an absolute power. A theory or primitive religion must occupy itself with the way in which the integration of ethics into religion was fulfilled in primitive Christianity: on the one hand it will tend to an ethical radicalism and, on the other hand, such exaggerated human intention, the fruit of such radicalism, will be controlled by the ethics of forgiveness.

If we consider religion a sign language, we are giving it not just a semiotic, but also a systemic character. We know today that “signs” can perform their task

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8 The “systemic” mode of conceiving religion, sketched as follows, is motivated by three notions:
(1) The systems of religious conviction are governed by a few “implicit axioms” or “regulating norms”, that do not necessarily need to exist as linguistically formulated statements, but are, above all, susceptible of awareness and linguistic expression. I acknowledge this understanding to Dietrich Ritschl, “Die Erfahrung der Wahrheit. Die Steuerung von Denken und Handeln durch implizite Axiome, in: id., Konzepte, München: Kaiser 1986, 147-166.


(3) Religions are systems with their own references and alien references, that are capable of self-organization.
only in relation and opposition to other signs. Together they constitute a “system”. Equally, the signs and forms of expression of a religion also form a sign system, a homogenous “language” which is guided by certain rules and composed by specific elements, just as a language is governed by grammar and the lexicon. Like other grammars, the grammar of religious language consists of positive and negative rules of association, that is, indications of what one may or may not combine. When we enter a church, for example, which has no imagery whatsoever and find on the altar nothing but an open Bible, we know we are in a Reformed church. Within the Protestant “dialect” of Christian sign language there is a negative rule of association which says that it is forbidden to associate God with images – even more so to depict God with images. To counterbalance this there is a positive rule of association: this God shows himself throughout the Holy Scripture. Thus, Bible and altar are linked – and no decorative candles are found on the altar. From various religious grammars we know if we are moving within a Jewish, Muslim or Christian sign language – or if, as in our example, we find ourselves within a Reformed, Lutheran or Catholic “dialect” of a same Christian sign language.

A theory of primitive Christian religion shall be concerned with getting to know such a “grammar” of primitive Christian sign language. By the way, the Jewish religion is the starting point. Here we find two basic axioms. On the one hand there is a negative rule of association: the one and only God may not be associated with other gods – all that goes with them is an abomination to him. On the other hand, we find a positive rule of association: God is uniquely associated with his people in that he made a covenant with it and gave it the Torah in order to keep this covenant. In abstract terms, monotheism and covenantal nomism are the two basic axioms of Judaism.

In addition there are many individual basic motifs, that is, grammatical rules of religious sign language with only a limited outreach. They are subordinate to the fundamental axioms and are organized by these axioms: the motifs of creation, wisdom, repentance, love of neighbour, distance from God, etc.

The question is: how far have these basic axioms and motifs been changed in primitive Christianity? Was the rule of monotheistic exclusivism not weakened when a human being appeared alongside God as his son? At least in the Gospel of John Christians had to defend themselves against the Jewish charge that among them a human being was making himself God. Similarly, one can ask whether covenantal nomism would not be abandoned in principle if the association of God and people were extended to all peoples by belief in a redeemer. In sum, in primitive Christianity, instead of the two Jewish basic axioms of monotheism and covenantal nomism, we find the two basic axioms of monotheism and belief in a redeemer – and here monotheism has been modified by belief in a redeemer and covenantal nomism has been extended to all human beings by belief in a universal redeemer.

In any case, the recognition of the systemic character of religious sign languages means we must understand their origin as the “formation of a system”. But what

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does it mean to form a system? Two properties must be recognizable. First, a system has the ability to organize itself from its own centre; that is, its behaviour and development are not just guided only from the outside. Secondly, it has the ability to distinguish itself from its environment, that is, to differentiate between self-reference and outside reference. A language system (thanks to the linguistic usage of its “inhabitants”) can test successfully if a statement is an element of its own system (that is, of the English language) or if it represents an alien element (that is, a typically Anglo construction), even if this construction makes use of English vocabulary. So a theory of primitive Christianity will investigate from what centre the new religious sign system organizes itself and the way in which it differs from the surrounding world – and develops and imposes its own rules in its own sphere (in many conflicts and confrontations). Therefore we shall have to follow the process of differentiation from Judaism in the direction of a self-organizing, independent sign system.

Finally, a few words about the third characteristic of religious sign language: it is a cultural phenomenon, that is, it is neither (just) a natural nor a supernatural phenomenon. “Cultural” means that any religious sign language is produced by human beings independently of the fact that religions understand themselves as the result of divine action. The association of certain material elements with meaning and the organization of these meanings in a system of meaning is human action; above all it is social behaviour. In effect, only through the participation of entire groups and communities can a sign system become operative. Religions are socio-cultural sign systems. Therefore they are historical: they appear and disappear, split up and get mixed up. They are closely bound up with the history of those groups which hand them down. The history of primitive Christianity is the history of the origin of a new religion which detaches itself from its mother religion and becomes independent. A theory of primitive Christianity must be concerned with an interpretation of such change.

In the history of religion, renewal and change can take place by a reinterpretation of the traditional sign systems (for example, through exegesis). Nonetheless, it can take place through a selection from the elements of traditional religion: some ritual practices, such as circumcision, were excluded from primitive Christianity; other elements, like the commandment to love one's neighbour and the metaphor of father for God came into the centre. Finally, there is the possibility of producing new developments through an exchange with neighboring systems of religion. Primitive Christianity also improved its faith in interaction with its pagan environment – even if the old history of religions school overestimated the extent of this “syncretism”.

Such a change in the religious sign system is produced above all by charismatics, that is, by the influence some individuals, moved by an irrational power of emanation, exert on others – independently of authority roles and traditions, often in the face of the vigorous hostility of the world in which they live. The stigmatizing of the charismatic by the world around can even increase its influence: if he survives rejection by social and moral contempt and negative sanctions, he questions the “system” which repudiates him all the more tenaciously. This connection between stigma and charisma emerges in a crystal clear way in primitive Christianity: in

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9 Wolfgang Lipp dealt with the nexus between stigma and charisma in several works: id., “Stigma und Charisma. Über soziales Grenzverhalten”, Schriften zur Kulturosziologie 1, Berlin: Reimer 1985; id., “Charisma — Social Deviation, Leadership and Cultural Change. A Sociology of Deviance Approach”, The Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion 1 (1977), 59-77. His ideas were initially applied only to Jesus and his followers (Michael N. Ebertz, Das Charisma des Gekreuzigten. Zur Soziologie der Jesusbewegung, WUNT 45, Tübingen: Mohr 1987); later, to all primitive Christianity (Helmut Mödritzer, Stigma und Charisma im...
particular the crucified Jesus – who suffered one of the cruellest kinds of death, *mors turpissima crucis* – has here become the ruler of the world and the decisive authority. The Roman officials and soldiers who condemned him and executed him between two criminals could not imagine that 300 years later the Roman Empire would “convert” to him and confess him the judge of dead and living.

In addition to the connection between charisma and stigma there is a second connection: *that between charisma and crisis*. Innovator, active charismatics develop in times of upheaval when many people are ready to forsake traditional convictions and adopt new orientations. Here we should point out only two obvious points: crises are not just times of impoverishment but times of change. Even times of economic boom can shake traditional values and orientations. Crises are far from being experienced only by the lower strata. They embrace all social strata – and here opposition between strata or classes is almost always an element in the crisis.

The function of religion: religion as the promise of a gain in life

With our reflections regarding the cultural character of religion we have already considered the function of religion in life, to which the second half of our definition relates. Religion is a cultural sign system which promises a *gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality*. Here we shall limit ourselves to explaining what this “gain in life” consists of. I intend to return to further aspects of religion only in the last chapter.

In religion, a “gain in life” is often understood in a very tangible way, above all as health and aid. One need think only of the miracle stories and healing charisma in primitive Christianity. But often religions promise something more sublime in addition: a life in truth and love, a gain of identity in the crises and changes of life – even the promise of eternal life.

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The reflection produced by sciences of religion investigates above all the psychological and social gain in life, that is, the function of religion in individual and social life.

As to the *psychological* function of religion, one can distinguish cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic functions.10

*Cognitively*, religions have always offered a wide interpretation of the world: they attribute to human beings their place in the universe of things. Only with the loss of their “competence to provide a conception of world” in modern times did a tendency develop to understand religion as “feeling” or as an “appeal for decision”. But that is unilateral. Religion maintains belief in a hidden order of things – and it functions where our knowledge fails in cognitive crises (for example, in the question of what lies beyond the world in which we live and what removes us from ourselves in death). At the same time, religion awakens the sense of places of cognitive confusion: it keeps provoking by testimonies of the irruption of a wholly other world into our world. Primitive Christianity also attests such “irruptions of revelation”, which break like a thief in the night into the world in which human beings live. Time and again we hear of ecstatic phenomena, of visions and revelations.

*Emotionally*, religion has similar functions: it provides a feeling of security in this world and a trust that in the end all will be well or could be well. But precisely be-

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10 Several psychologies of religion emphasize only the emotional aspects of religion. The following authors rightly approach the several functions of religion: Bernhard Grom, Religionspsychologie, München: Kösel/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1992; Nils G. Holm, Einführung in die Religionspsychologie, UTB 1592, München/ Basel: Reinhardt 1990.
cause of this, it occupies itself with those limit-situations where this trust is threatened and shaken: with anxiety, mourning, guilt and failure. Here it stabilizes people in face of the danger of emotional collapse. At the same time, religion provokes such limit-situations. It is the motivation for extremes of behaviour like asceticism and martyrdom, or evokes deep feelings of guilt: fear of hell is as much a part of primitive Christianity as security in the love of God.

Finally, the pragmatic function of religion consists in that it legitimates forms of life with their patterns of behaviour. Here too we find crises both overcome and provoked. Religion indicates possibilities to deal pragmatically with that over which we have no control: with situations in which our patterns of behaviour fail. It overcomes the crises in our actions and yet itself creates such crises by defining zones which are not under our control: spheres over which human beings could have control but over which they should not have control. Thus religion involves human life at many points with an aura of untouchability: with irrational taboos, according to some, and with the aura of the divine image, according to others.

The three functions of religion can be shown in a synoptic table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Religion as an ordering force</th>
<th>Religion as the overcoming of crises</th>
<th>Religion as provoking crises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Construction of a cognitive order: indicating the place of human beings in the cosmos</td>
<td>Overcoming of cognitive crises: confusing caused by frontier experiences</td>
<td>Provocation of cognitive crises: the irruption of the Wholly Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Construction of a basic emotional trust in a legitimate order</td>
<td>Overcoming emotional crises: anxiety, guilt, failure, mourning</td>
<td>Provocation of emotional crises through anxiety, consciousness of guilt, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
<td>Construction of accepted forms of life, their values and norms</td>
<td>Overcoming of crises: conversion, atonement, renewal</td>
<td>Provocation of crises through the feeling of the unconditioned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The important thing is that the person rids herself of any unilateral definition of the function of religion. It serves not only to stabilize thought, feeling and action; it serves not only to overcome crises. There can also be a “gain in life” in the exposure to serious upheavals, in their being purified by “trials” and “temptations”, and achieving a new life. We will not understand primitive Christianity if we see religion only as a way of overcoming crises. Here, rather, we keep experiencing eruptions which themselves become crises. What we hear of irrational impulses, of the irruptions of alien realities, extreme forms of behaviour like asceticism and martyrdom, certainly does not fit at all into the picture of a sedative religion which “frees” society from metaphysical unrest.

The social functions of religion are just as diversified as its psychological functions. Surely, here too there are mono-functional interpretations of religion, for example, when it is said that religion serves to legitimate the existing social order or is the opium of the people. This is all true, but not the whole truth. Here, too, only through a multiplicity of functions will we do justice to actual religious life.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) I have proposed an attempt that takes into consideration apparently opposite social functions of religion in: Gerd Theissen, “Theoretische Probleme religionssoziologischer Forschung und die Analyse des Urchristentums, NZStH 16 (1974), 35-56 = Studien zur Soziologie des Urchristentums, WUNT 19, Tübingen: Mohr 1989, 355-78.
here it is clear that, above all, religion has a social function: in the socialization of the individual and in settling conflicts between groups.

Religion’s socializing function aims at the individual so internalizes the values and norms of society that he becomes a loyal inhabitant of the historically contingent “world” in which he lives. Through rites of passage religion helps people to grow into this order of life and to remain in it when they doubt the meaning and value of the existing order in “theodicy crises”. Often religion can support individuals who are in risk being “lost” as a result of crises. But often religion also has the function of motivating people to “become prominent” in the common life. Thus it becomes a counter-cultural process against the world which “lies in evil”.

The function of religion in regulating conflicts between groups and classes is clearly distinguished from its socializing function. Here it is not just the individual who confronts society; whole groups formed as a result of economic status or ethnic adherence come into conflict with one another. Here too we are confronted with several functions: regulating conflict, blunting and intensifying conflicts. Religion can both build bridges by emphasizing shared fundamental values and foment aggression by fundamentalism.

The variety of social functions of religion can be illustrated in the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socialization of the individual</th>
<th>Legitimation of order</th>
<th>Overcoming of crises</th>
<th>Exacerbation of crises</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction into the social order: rites of passage, mediation of value</td>
<td>Stabilization in theodicy crises</td>
<td>Countercultural protest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulating group conflicts</td>
<td>Legitimation of a minimal consensus between conflicting groups</td>
<td>Compensation for social damage</td>
<td>Protest and utopia of justice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the research into primitive Christianity one reaches a realistic result only if one considers all these contradictory functions. In primitive Christianity we find a strong tendency to make Christians the best citizens, wives and servants according to the standards of the time – thus, a markedly conformist tendency and, at the same time, a huge counter-cultural energy which withdrew people from their normal life and made them itinerant charismatics following a deviant life-style. We find indications of a “revolution of values” in which simple people appropriate values and attitudes of the upper class – but also of a conformity in values which repressed these revolutionary valorative impulses. Anyone seeking to investigate primitive Christianity in an unprejudiced way should always consider both sides.

In order to understand the psychological and social functions of religion, it is important to be clear how religion can exercise these functions as a cultural sign language. Here are two very different approaches in theories of religion. For many, the religious sign system is merely secondary to the functions of religion in life.

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12 In principle, one may differentiate the following impostations in theories of religion: 1. Cognitive theories of religion see in religion a system of representations related to specific religious objects. 2. The expressive (or expressivist) theories of religion see in religion an expression of the human life, especially its emotionality (as in Friedrich D. Schleiermacher, for example). 3. The pragmatic-functional theories of religion see in religion, above all, a control system for the human behaviour – as when they interpret the power of the sacred as the objectivation of society’s supremacy in the confrontation with the individual (as, for example, in Emile Durkheim). In this book, we shall defend a cultural-linguist (or semiotic) theory of religion: religions are three-dimensional sign systems. They organize knowledge, emotions, and behaviours. On this cultural-linguistic theory see: George A. Lindbeck, Christliche Lehre als Grammatik des Glaubens, 52ff.
For this approach, what comes first is a religious experience (something as the experience of the holy as *mysterium facinosum et tremendum*) or an elemental vital problem which is articulated in religious forms (something like a discussion with a prepotent father in the Oedipus complex). The religious sign world thus serves as a secondary expression of such primary experiences and problems. In such theories of religion, the function of religion is in life, or a religious experience is the real essence of religion.

Here we have already defended another position by defining the essence of religion as a cultural sign system. Behind this definition is the conviction that a historically given sign language is the condition for the possibility of religious experience and functions in life. The old Protestant dogmatic theologians uttered this in their own way by putting the *verbum externum* (that is, the objective religious sign language, the world of the Bible and preaching) before the *verbum internum*, religious experience. They were right in this.

Now, what we need to clarify is the question how this religious sign world can have an effect on life. How can it rule thought, feeling and action and allow people to be engaged in social co-operation and conflict?

To answer this we must consider once more the forms of religious expression. In the myth, rites and ethic of a religion we often find those elements which also have an effect in life: roles, symbols and norms. By the way, above all myths contain roles; rites work with symbols; and ethics with commandments – but it is characteristic or roles, symbols and norms that they appear everywhere. They wander through all forms of expression.

*Roles* make identification possible. In this sense, religions are an “offer of roles” to their members.13 We know that the adoption of a role also changes one’s perception: we look at a wood differently depending on whether we look at it in the role of a forester, a walker or a road-builder. Thus, the adoption of religious roles makes it possible to see the world with different eyes from usual: it becomes transparent to God. One might even say that the adoption of any role brings with it a corresponding bond. Anyone who adopts the role of a pupil adopts a relationship to a “teacher”. Anyone who adopts the role of a “child” adopts a relationship to “parents”. Equally, the biblical roles “offer”, at the same time, the adoption of a relationship to God. Anyone who identifies with the role of Abraham also accepts a relationship to the role of the one who made Abraham leave his ancestral home. Anyone who adopts the role of the “I” in the psalms of lament admits a relationship with God. Such roles are found not only in the religions’ traditional narratives and myths; rather, they are “played out” in rites – and they serve as paradigms of behaviour for ethics. Through ritual performance, the adoption of roles is “internalized”. Anyone who is baptized becomes a “child of God”; anyone who takes part in the Eucharist becomes a disciple of Jesus. Through ethical behaviour these roles are “practised” also in daily life.

*Symbols* emerge through a symbolic perception of the world by which real things assume a referential character to something else.14 They become transparent to the

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14 The ambiguous idea of the symbol can be clearly used only when there is a mention to the traditions of thought within which it is used.
whole vital world, to its deep dimensions and to what is beyond it. At the same time they become transparent to the deep levels within the human soul. It is reasonable to distinguish between “symbols” and “roles”, for most symbols do not allow any identification in the sense that one can identify with them through as an agent. Such symbols can be topological places like road, sea, wilderness, field; architectural structures like temple, house and hut; or parts of the body like hand, foot, eye, ear, heart, etc. By their character as pointers to something else they make it possible to be oriented in the world (and to confront one’s own inner being). They build a cosmos in which one can breathe and live: the world becomes a great home, nature becomes a temple, the body, a living sacrifice, etc.

The way by which religion most directly affects life is through norms. In that case, these not always need to be imperative formulations, although “commandments” play a role in religious life that should not be underestimated. Maxims in the form of sentences also serve to provide orientation in life. Some of these imperatives and sentences have a high degree of abstraction. They represent the fundamental motives and axioms of a religion – like the first commandment or the love of neighbour in Judaism and Christianity.

(a) Through the aesthetic tradition we are acquainted with the contrast between symbol and allegory. In this context, the symbol is valid as a sensitive manifestation of an idea in the concrete, while allegory allows only a relation mediated by thought between the sensitive concrete and its meaning. In both cases, something objective is revealed in the symbol and allegory (J. W. Goethe). We are used to this opposition thanks to the literary theory of the German classicism.

(b) Through the psychological tradition we are acquainted with the notion of symbol as an expression of the unconscious in dreams and myth – whether as a social dissimulation of illicit impulses and desires that cannot be directly introduced in communication (for S. Freud, the oneric image is a hidden “allegory”) or as a language that renders the unconscious accessible to public communication (according to C.G. Jung and others, the oneric image is a revealing symbol).

(c) In the neo-Kantian tradition, the notion of symbol is a generic concept for several “symbolic forms” of ordering and structuring the world: through myth, language, art and knowledge (E. Cassirer). In this case, the notion of symbol does not refer to the manifestation of an objective or subjective “transcendent” reality, but is the expression of a transcendental intellectual action of the human being with which he organizes his world.

Despite these three traditions, all of them present in the notion of symbol above employed, one should differentiate symbol from metaphor in the linguistic images, but without separating them: one symbol is the representation of a real object that is transparent to a deeper sense. A real flame is presented in such a way that it becomes transparent for a real passion. Symbols are based in the capacity of symbolically perceiving the real world. Thus, symbolic texts must always be understood both literally and figuratively. They have a primary sense – and, at the same time, a surplus value of meaning. In rebuttal, when someone speaks of the “flames of passion” (with no reference to a real fire), one is building a linguistic metaphor from a symbolically perceived reality. Whereas symbols must be taken literally (and also be understood figuratively), metaphors can only be understood figuratively. A literal understanding of the latter would be always a misunderstanding. So, one same “image” can be found in a text both as a symbol (as a transparent reality) and a metaphor (as a figurative representation). Consequently, the religious imaginary, which we previously called “symbol”, is often found in texts as metaphors. For the delimitation of the several forms of the imaginary, see Petra v. Gemünden, Vegetationsmetaphorik im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt, NTOA 18, Freiburg Schweiz: Universitätsverlag/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1993, I-49 (with bibliography).

15 Both notions — “ethical norms” and “commandments” — belong to several cultural contexts of thought: a “commandment” is part of an objective law prescribed to the human being. The idea of “norm” emerged only in modern times as a concept for “practical rules”; later, though, it became an absolutely wide concept, capable of pointing out everything that is “normative” in the everyday life, in science and in religion. Cf. Dietmar Mieth, Art. “Normen”, HRWG IV, 1998, 243-250. Distinctive for the normative system of biblical religion is that there are already two not prevailing differentiations:

1. The distinction between juridical norms and moral norms. Surely, in the Old Testament it is possible to clearly distinguish the norms kept by sanctions from those freed from the sanctions imposed by a human judge, for here enters the understanding of God as a Judge. Nonetheless, in the collection of the Old Testament laws, one often finds both of them, side by side.

2. The distinction between ethic norms that make it possible to men to live together from the ritual norms that make it possible the worship of God. The fulfilling of ethic norms is also understood as “divine worship” – often more than the worship itself.
Through roles, symbols and norms a few axioms and basic motifs are communicated in always new variations: so, those elements of a grammar of the religious sign languages that we internalize in, with and under religious narratives, rites and norms. We so strongly internalize them that although they are culturally learned, they work like an *apriori* of behaviour and experience. They determine the way in which we interpret the world and life and react to them. “Faith”, as Paul rightly says, comes from the “word” which is historically transmitted (Rom 10.17). What this word communicates is near to the human heart (Rom 10.8). It is “internalized”. We see the world in the light of such internalized convictions. So those who have internalized the basic motif of “creation” from the offer of religious roles and symbols, that is, the conviction that everything has been created by an infinitely higher power with human beings in the midst of it all, change their perception of the world and their behaviour in it in the light of this faith in creation: everything becomes transparent to the creator. And all human making should contain all creation.

Here we should interrupt our sketch of a general theory of religion. The most important categories by means of which we intend to analyse primitive Christianity have been developed or mentioned briefly. Thus in a third section we can present, once again as a summary, a first description of primitive Christianity and sketch out three basic problems, which we will deal with in the next chapters.

**Basic problems of a theory of primitive Christian religion**

If we want to describe the primitive Christian religion’s *proprium*, the easiest thing to do is to indicate the way in which it differs from its mother religion, Judaism. Here we shall proceed by means of the categories introduced above: basic axioms, basic motifs, forms of expression and questions, always looking for common features with Judaism and differences from it.

While Judaism is determined by two *basic* axioms, an exclusive monotheism and a covenantal nomism, which associates God to this one people and this people to the one and only God, in primitive Christianity these basic axioms are changed. Monotheism is still the first axiom, nonetheless it is modified by the second axiom – faith in a redeemer: the whole religious sign system is restructured in the light of the figure of a single redeemer. Everything is related to this centre. This redeemer stands alongside with God, which should be experienced by the Jews as a questioning of a strict monotheism. At the same time, through this faith in a redeemer

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16 Since the exile, monotheism is Israel’s basic confession. In this case it is an exclusive monotheism that excludes other gods and their adoration – in opposition to a philosophical monotheism which is similar to the practical adoration of several gods in the popular cult, since in the end, behind the several divinities there is a single god. The encounter of these monotheisms is the base-theme of the ancient Judaism in Hellenistic times. Cf. Yehoshua Amir, “Die Begegnung des biblischen und des philosophischen Monotheismus als Grundthema des jüdischen Hellenismus”, EvTh 38 (1978), 2-19. In the exclusive monotheism, one can theoretically distinguish between prophetic monotheism and practical monotheism: the prophetic monotheism is transmitted by a prophetic figure, with appeals to revelation (through Echnaton, in Egypt, or Deutero-Isaiah, in Israel), while the practical monotheism evolves from the worship of a god (from a temporary henotheism or even a perpetual monolatry), to whom situations of crisis may occur and in which people expect salvation exclusively from a god. They both came together in Israel: oracular prophetic figures imposed faith in a single God; a chronic crisis situation made their message plausible. Cf. Bernhard Lang, Art. “Monotheismus”, HRWG IV, 1998, 148-165. On the difference between prophetic, practical, and philosophical monotheism, see pp. 151-154.

17 The notion of “covenantal nomism” expresses that God’s election of a people (his covenant) supposes the people’s care for the law. It is not the law’s duty to establish God’s covenant with Israel, but to keep Israel within the covenant. So, regarding salvation, law does not fulfill a “getting in”, but a “staying in”. Thus, as Christianity, Judaism is a religion of gratuity. Such fundamental structure of religion was pointed out by Edward P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion, London: SCM 1977 = Paulus un das palästinische Judentum. Ein Vergleich zweier Religionsstrukturen, StUNT 17, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1985.
mer, Judaism is opened to all people. Primitive Christianity is largely a universalized Judaism.

Several basic motifs of religion remain the same in Judaism and Christianity, except that in Christianity they are crystallized around a new centre. Both religions share basic motifs of their understanding of the world. On the one hand, it is irrational regarding creation. The divine power can always intervene surprisingly in history. To counterbalance this motif of creation and miracle we find a “sapiential motif”. Such creation is the expression of the wisdom of God, the regular structures of which can be recognized. And in the understanding of history we also find a hidden order – despite all the emphasis on the sovereign intervention of God: the will of God for the salvation of Israel and humankind.

Equally, both religions share the main basic motifs of human self-understanding. In both of them, faith is seen as an adequate access to God: an attachment to God in thought, feelings and desires. In both, conversion is considered an opportunity and a commandment in the human being’s confrontation with God. In both, an intense feeling of distance from God penetrates thought; this is more radically formulated in Christianity (in Paul) than in Judaism elsewhere. The motifs of faith, conversion and distance structure the relationship to God.

The structuring of the relationship with other men and women by the two basic motifs of love of neighbour and humility is analogous. In primitive Christianity, love of neighbour is extended as a continuation of Jewish tendencies so that it becomes love of the enemy, the stranger and the sinner. The readiness for humility comes in as a complement: if love of neighbour is love between equals, then only through the renunciation of their superiority by those who are superior and through the revaluation of the lowly can love be realized; in other words, by humility and renunciation of status.

Even though there are differences between Judaism and primitive Christianity at the level of the deep basic motifs, they are limited. The closeness and affinity between both religions is indisputable. The differences appear less at the deeper level than on the surface of the forms of expression.

The first form of expression of a religion is its myth or basic narrative. Usually this takes place in an indefinite primal time, when gods established the world. In Judaism this myth had been linked to history in a unique way: it became a history of salvation which after primal times concentrates wholly on Israel and that, overcoming the legendary primal time, reaches the present. In it, the drama between several gods and goddesses has been replaced by the drama of the one God and the people he has chosen. This God no longer has a social partner among gods and goddesses; Israel is his only social partner and the representative of all men and women. Israel is God’s servant, God’s son, God’s witness, God’s wife. Primitive Christianity not only continued this history but recentred it on just one man, Jesus of Nazareth. He was understood as the fulfilment of the whole biblical history.

18 Instead of “myth”, one may more neutrally speak of “base narratives”, for in the biblical religion in such base narratives the mythical and the historical were closely linked – and within the historical, “literature and truth” were mixed. The notion of “story” involves everything: the mythical, the fictitious and the historical, in proper sense. Such base narratives ground both the identity of whole groups and the identity of the individual. What we call “Christology” in the New Testament is always based in a narrative (sometimes more or less developed). The Christological titles of grandeur are abbreviations of narratives. As to the theory of relation between added abstractions and narratives in religion, see Dietrich Ritschl/Hugh O. Jones, “Story als Rohmaterial der Theologie”, TEH 192, München: Kaiser 1976. Martin Karrer presents a New Testament Christology detached from the fixation in titles and appreciates them in the frame of its “narratives in Jesus Christus im Neuen Testament, GNT 11, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck 1998.
hitherto; moreover, in him mythical eschatological expectations were depicted as history. He embodies the rule of God. He "historicizes" this eschatological myth. The centring of the new religious basic narrative on this one historical figure from the present and the recent past made the new religion even more “historical” than its mother religion. The link to concrete history was intensified. But at the same time we experience in primitive Christianity an intensification of the myth, indeed a regular remythologizing, which begins with this one historical figure. In a very short time after his death, Jesus was elevated to deity: he was worshipped as the Son of God, exalted Lord and Redeemer. The time of his appearance was surrounded with the mythical aura of a new time of judgement and his history was dramatized mythically as a conflict between Satan and demons, between God and his Son, between the Lord and the spiritual powers subjected by him. Thus we find two opposite tendencies in primitive Christianity: an intensification of the relationship to history and an intensification of the myth, both a rehistoricizing and a remythologizing. In other words, history and myth form a unique unity in tension. A concrete human being becomes deity, deity incarnates itself in a concrete human being. This unity in tension must be the first topic of a theory of primitive Christian religion, and we should be discussing it in Chapters 2 and 3.

The second religious form of expression of primitive Christianity is the ethic.19 Here we can observe an increasing “theologizing” of all norms already in the history of Israel and Judaism.20 Not only the cultic commandments and a minimum of fundamental ethics as they were formulated in the Decalogue, but all norms led again to the will of God and legitimated by the Torah: the whole law is theologized; it is valid not as law officially promulgated by the king but as God’s law. All the sapiential maxims of life derived were regarded as part of the Torah. All the prophetic instructions were regarded as its explanation. Judaism was proud of shaping the whole of life in this way in the light of the Torah. Consequently, all norms were filled with the intensity of the “unconditional”. Primitive Christianity continued this tendency. It radicalizes the traditional ethic when it provides norms for human aggressiveness, sexuality and communication extending to the innermost human depths which were also beyond social control – as in the antitheses of the Sermon of the Mount. But at the same time we find an opposite tendency: a relativization of the ritual commandments, in which circumcision and the commandments relating to food and cleanness are set aside. In a way, such relativization extends to all commandments: in view of the radicalization of the basic ethical commandments, we find an increased sensitivity to the impossibility of fulfilling them and a non-moralizing readiness for forgiveness and reconciliation which applied even to the sinner who behaved contrary to the norms. Thus we find two opposed tendencies: on the one hand, a radicalization of the norms to the limits of what is psychologically and

19 Although in science of religion myth and rite are often mentioned close to each other – and, at most, ethics is pointed out as a complement according to the base narrative of primitive Christianity (in which its myth must be sought – we will analyse its ethics first. This is due both to the huge weight of ethics in biblical religion and to the immense importance of rite: in rite we find a condensed synthesis of all religion – including its ethics. Only when ethics is known it is possible to acknowledge its symbolization in rite.

20 Eckart Otto emphasized, very especially, the fact that in the Old Testament all norms are theologized: Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments, ThW 3, Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln: Kohlhammer 1994. There, it is evidenced that God often acts in norms not reinforced by sanctions. In the Covenant book, the following norms are free from juridical sanctions: the freeing of the Hebrew slaves (Ex 21,1-11), attention to strangers, widows and orphans (22,20-23), the ban of interests (22,24-25), the ban of false report (23,1ss), help to the enemy (23,4ss), sabbatical year and gleaning (23,10-11), the sanctification of the seventh day also for animals, servants and strangers (23,12) — thus, precisely the social commandments, in which one can experience a more human spirit.
socially possible (and often even beyond that), and on the other hand a radicalization of the acceptance (to the limits of what is socially tolerable). The second task of a theory of primitive Christian religion is to interpret this tension. We shall deal with it in Chapters 4 to 6: with the basic tension between the two tendencies towards radicalization and their effect on social and psychological life.

In the third form of religious expression, that is, in the rite,\textsuperscript{21} we again find a basic tension which is characteristic of primitive Christianity. Despite all discontinuity, here too the tendencies of the preceding history of biblical religion continue: in it sacrifice had increasingly become atoning sacrifice and the rites relating to cleanness had been increasingly intensified. Certainly primitive Christianity ended the centuries-long practice of sacrifice. It put new rites, above all baptism and Eucharist, in the place of the old rites. Nonetheless, we recognize the continuation of existing tendencies: in effect, both rites (or sacraments) are focussed on the forgiveness of sins and atonement. In this development two contrary tendencies are now intertwined. The new sacraments which have come into being are impressively “non-violent” in their outward celebration. They transform everyday practices – washing and eating – into symbolic rites. No blood is shed in them. Nevertheless, in addition to this reduction of violence in outward celebration there is an increase of violence in the meanings by which the new rites receive a symbolic surplus value of meaning: baptism is interpreted as a free acceptance of death and a symbolic burial (Rom. 6.3-4). The Lord’s Supper refers to a human sacrifice and is even interpreted (by outsiders) as barbaric cannibalism, since the flesh and blood of the Son of Man are consumed in it (John 6.51-53). These opposed tendencies must be interpreted in a theory of primitive Christian religion. We shall deal with them in Chapters 7 and 8.

 Obviously, we have already supposed that all three basic tensions in myth, ethic and rite are related. On the one hand, it has always to do with a movement towards history, towards human reality, towards the everyday world; on the other hand, it has to do with a movement contrary to myth, ethic radicality and cruel-seeming fantasies which run contrary to the everyday world. Thus one can ask whether in the end the two contrary tendencies are not linked with the two basic axioms of primitive Christian religion: monotheism is linked to an affirmation of creation, to an ethical realism and to a nearness to everyday life; the belief in a redeemer, on the contrary, is linked to a mythical deification of Jesus of Jesus, a radical ethic in the new creature and an archaic interpretation of salvific rites.

Anyway, in the further chapters we shall deal with unity and autonomy\textsuperscript{22} of the new primitive Christianity.

In chapters 9 and 10 I would like to show how primitive Christianity differentiated itself from Judaism and constituted itself as a distinctive sign language. We shall follow the course of a renewal movement within Judaism, passing a Jewish heresy to the final schism and the foundation of a new religion. In the New Testament this development finds its climax in the Gospel of John, where everything in the new religion is reorganized and legitimated from a single centre: from the Redeemer who is sent, the Saviour whose message throughout refers to himself. He makes hi-

\textsuperscript{21} Sigrid Brandt, Opfer als Gedächtnis. Zur Kritik und Neukonturierung theologischer Rede von Opfer (tese), Heidelberg 1997, presents a theological analysis of the rites of offering in the Lord’s Supper.

\textsuperscript{22} The idea of an “autonomy of religion” is not a general category of Sciences of religion. A branch of Sciences of religion now emphasizes mainly that the segregation of religion in the bosom of society and its separation from the State is a specifically European development and cannot be projected in other societies. Cf. Dario Sabbatucci, Art. “Kultur und Religion”, HRWG I, 1988, 43-58.
mself the content of his preaching and dissociates himself from the “world” in alien dualistic references.

In Chapter 11 I shall investigate how this autonomy of the new sign language developed and preserved itself in the two great crises of primitive Christianity. In the first century these were the Jewish crisis over the detachment of Christianity from Judaism, and in the second century the Gnostic crisis, which was an attempt to dissolve the Christian sign language as a special instance of a universal human symbolic language. Both crises served directly or indirectly to bring about a withdrawal from the surrounding world – and were governed not least by the overall political situation of primitive Christianity. Forces contrary to the compromise with the environment were activated in repeated prophetical crises in which the original radicalism of primitive Christianity was invigorated.

All these crises clarify the boundaries of what is normatively valid sign language in primitive Christianity, not only outwardly, but also inwardly. Nonetheless, within this framework primitive Christianity develops an amazing diversity and plurality. Such plurality will be sketched out in Chapter 12 in a panoramic view of its history – above all in order to show that with the formation of the canon this history ends with clear demarcations and a deliberate decision for plurality. With the formation of the canon, the structure of the new sign system is complete. The end of primitive Christianity has been reached. From now on, all further developments justify themselves by exegesis of the canonical scriptures. Concluding, this chapter will point out that which gives unit and coherence to the plurality of the new religion: the hidden grammar of the new sign language in the form of basic axioms and basic motifs, in their several variations, permeate the most important groups of texts, forms and themes. They incarnate what functions as the normatization of historical religions. Without such “normatization” through basic axioms and basic motifs no religion can exist. Thus, the examination of such religious grammar is the task of an analysis of primitive Christianity from sciences of religion.

In the last Chapter, we will once again return to the starting point. In this introductory chapter I have given a definition of religion and by way of experiment applied it to primitive Christianity. Part of the definition has not been discussed here. Our definition was: Religion is a cultural sign system which promises a gain in life by corresponding to an ultimate reality. I have depicted the primitive Christian religion as a sign system and as a gain in life. But what is the meaning of “corresponding to an ultimate reality” in such a theory of religion? We now reach that point where a theory of primitive Christianity leaves one free to decide: one can turn such a theory into a theology of the New Testament if one uses the sign language developed in primitive Christianity in order to come into contact with an ultimate reality. But one has also the freedom to deal with this religion as if maintaining a monument which seeks to preserve the roots of our culture. Who would argue that the maintenance of monuments is a serious concern? At all events, it is a means of preventing the destruction of monuments or their forgetfulness.

I conclude with a picture of the view of primitive Christian religion presented here. This religion is a sign language – a “semiotic cathedral” built in the midst of history: not out of stones but out of signs of various kinds. Like all churches and cathedrals, it too has been completely designed by human beings, built by human beings, and is used and preserved by human beings. Nonetheless, just as one cannot understand the Gothic cathedrals unless one hears and sees them as a hymn of praise to God in stone, so too one cannot understand this semiotic cathedral if one forgets that those who once built it did so as a great hymn of praise and thanksgi-
ving for the irruption of a transcendent reality. The secularized visitors to a cathedral can and may look at it in the awareness that they are before a form of human self-transcendence moulded in stone, produced not just for religious motives but also through power structures and intentions of domination as well as intense human anxieties and longings. But these secularized visitors would be crippled in their human sensitivity if they could not see that the cathedral was a powerful witness to human life which contains a longing that surpasses the mere ongoing life. Other visitors will visit the cathedral in order to have their thoughts guided towards an ultimate reality by the dynamic of the building made stone. They allow themselves to be taken by the longing for transcendence built into it. They join in its hymn of praise. What is there against both visitors exchanging their perspectives and entering into a rational conversation about the cathedral? The present sketch of a theory of primitive religion seeks to make such a conversation possible – a conversation about the mysterious sign world of primitive Christian religion. For some, this is part of maintaining monuments, and the maintenance of monuments is a very noble affair. But I should add that for me, a concern with primitive Christian religion involves more than maintaining a monument.