Subjectivation as a common feature of arts, religion and psychology

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A lot of environmental problems have long since developed into global problems. The solution to these problems only appears to be possible, however, if a global consensus is found. This is true for global warming and air, water and soil pollution. For various reasons it is also true for regional noise. After achieving a global consensus, regional activities are more meaningful. As most environmental problems are caused by human behaviour, it is the task of the environmental psychologists to establish whether there is such a thing as a common transnational code of standards and values, from which principles for dealing with the environment can be derived. Postmodern interpretations of the world and its order are also dependent upon such orientation

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1. Introduction-Cross Cultural Studies

I should like to take two investigations as the starting point. The first is the investigation into neighbour hood noise in residential areas in Japan and Germany; the second is the comparison of letters of complaint about noise in Hongkong and Germany which was carried out by Laucken, Mees & Chassein (1992).

The Study on Noise in Residential Neighbourhoods is the very first joint study with Seiichiro Namba and Sonoko Kuwano which we did 20 years ago. When we met for the first time, we decided to concentrate on a noise situation which was not regulated in either country, as would have been the case with aircraft noise, for example. We decided upon noise in residential neighbourhoods.

One important result was: The Germans felt comparatively more noise stress than the Japanese who reported lower degrees of disturbance, although they
could hear noises from neighbouring apartments more clearly. Far more Japanese in the survey than Germans believed that the could become accustomed to noise.

With reference to countermeasures, the findings are clear: the majority of the Japanese interviewees restrict themselves in their verbal utterances to saying nothing or to dropping gentle hints to noisy neighbouring families. Germans predominantly address the neighbours directly.

The question we ask ourselves is: which factors are responsible for making the Japanese and the Germans feel, perceive and act so differently? Study into Letters of Complaint about Noise in Germany and Hong Kong. Laucken, Mees & Chassein analysed letters in which people complained about noise in Germany and Hong Kong. Their assumption was that “culture represents an objective order, created by human beings, to regulate their interpersonal dealings with one another” (p. 117). If we want to find out “which normative systems of order people live in, we must be aware of the things they complain about” (p. 120).

How should we interpret such results? Which concept of social relations would be able to assist us? Laucken, Mees & Chassein report the following: “Our translator, Mr. Zhang, put us on the right track with a suggestion that was completely in tune with our cross-cultural principles. He told us that in order to understand the different facets of the Chinese complaints, we should familiarize ourselves with the Confucian way of life.”

Confucianism is, of all the religions, regarded as the one placing the greatest emphasis upon humanity, goodness and gentleness. How do people find the ideal social order? Respect and loyalty both within the family and outside, the need to belong are the guiding concepts and the basis of both social ethics and work ethics. Buddhism, too, has adopted Confucian ethics to a great extent.

Christian ethics: as in Confucianism the most important commandment is to love one’s neighbour, but even so, from the outset, a greater emphasis is placed upon individual vocation. Every human being is created by God Himself and is called to freedom. The concept of the individual acquired new significance particularly during the Italian Renaissance, the protestant Reformation and European Humanism. The concepts of personal freedom, justice, autonomy, independence and self-determination reached a new peak during the French Revolution and the Age of Western Enlightenment. It is always difficult for Europeans with a Christian ethical upbringing to disregard our individuality and to make our successes and failures over to a group.

The Christian concept of mankind also implies the conception of identity and authenticity: when He created us, God had a clearly defined image of us: our task throughout our lives consists in achieving a concord between our own conduct and this image; if we succeed in doing so, we follow God’s “calling”. In Christian thinking divine authority is represented by one’s conscience. That is why a person whose life is guided by these principles is constantly striving to meet the demands placed on him by his conscience and judging others by the same standard. If we act contrary to our consciences, we become guilty and burdened with sin, for which we expect punishment from God. Guilt and sin are constant central phenomena, which, perhaps in Taoist thought, too, are directed towards this personal God. We become guilty and sinful before a personal God whom we love and fear. In all our decision-making we are addressed as and are responsible as individuals. If ordered to by my conscience, I even have to decide against harmony. These are the standards by which we also judge our fellow men, and we are frequently very strict, to the point of self-righteousness. In social encounters Europeans then seem to me to be stricter, more absolute and more radical than the people of East Asia.

In this respect it would surely also be wrong to assume that even religious ideas do not alter when put into practice or even vanish. The status that Christian and Confucian ideas and principles have in practical life really needs verifying. Modern forms of conduct can only be partially explained by history alone. Onuma wrote therefore: “Although Confucianism is still an important factor in explaining how the Chinese, Koreans and Japanese think and
behave today, they still differ from one another and have different patterns of thought and behaviour than those originally laid down in Confucius' teaching" (Onuma, 2000, p. 70).

2. Subjectivation in Art and Religion

According to Eliade (1957, p. 8), hierophany deals with the mysterious process by which a reality which is not of this world is manifested in objects that are integrating components of our profane world. What is a human being enabled to do? He is in a position to bestow meanings, which objectively are not real, upon profane objects. In this case the religious scientist speaks of the sacralization of the world as the process in which the human being fills the physical space with meaning. "In ancient societies Man strived to live in the holy place or in close proximity to dedicated objects" (Eliade 1957, p. 9). The artist creating a work of art avails himself of this ability— as does the observer or listener. Art contributes to making a place holy, emphasizing it and making it visible.

At this point one may ask: is the ability to subjectivize a sort of divine principle that particularly distinguishes human beings and a number of other living beings and from which all human achievements can be derived? Is religion derivable from the need for subjectivation?

If the fact of subjectivation represents such a fundamental existential principle, one can assume that people practise sacralization at all times and in all places and create art. The religious scientist therefore even describes the "profane" human being who rejects any form of transcending as being "crypto-religious". For many people art has even replaced religion. Helga de la Motte-Haber was even of the opinion that secularization and profanity in Europe were virtually the preconditions for sacralization in music, quoting Richard Wagner as an example (1995, p. 9). Not only in Herder, but in German Romanticism as a whole "reverence" thus becomes an important attitude when listening to music. Reverence is originally a concept from Christian religion, meaning a way of experiencing holiness (Seidel 1995, p. 93). Reverence also becomes a central concept of Romanticism in experiencing nature. Respect for nature and the arts replace religion in the lives of people today. Even the natural sciences have become a sort of religion for many people.

In subjectivation, transcending and the creation of art an element of openness and freedom is revealed; it is also my belief that religion and art are fundamental to freedom. The way I see it, the liberation from the Communist system and German unification were not the result of research carried out by natural scientists and empirical psychologists, but was based on the will of theologists and artists to obtain freedom.

3. Why do Environmental Psychologists, Artists and Aesthetics Study Questions of Religion?

Which aspects of religion is a psychologist interested in? Whereas theologians are rather seeking the origins of the conception of God, we psychologists want to know which ideas about human beings, their relations to transcendent beings and their dealings with their social, cultural and objective environment stem from religion. I am not concerned with the problem of accounting for religion but with the question of how religions influence our everyday lives. It is not a question of evaluating motives of religious behaviour (prayers, sacrifices, celebrations); and it is also not a question of how religions have pushed through moral claims by means of deculturation and socialization and even used ideologies to make them implausible.

What is art? With regard to modern art, it could frequently be certified as being increasingly bereft of any function: it becomes meaningless, pointless— like the belief in a God or a higher, transcendent being (Kueng, 1988, p. 17). In this respect both the religions and the modern arts are overtaken by a common fate.

Art is perhaps a creation fathered by desire and born of the imagination. For there is no artistic ambition without desire for the 'higher things', and the desire can only be fulfilled by the creative imagination.

Christian religion and art both share the concept of
man’s autonomy. Art also essentially lives on the desire to question the visible, everyday world, to elevate it and to transcend it. Art and religion are pointless but not meaningless.

A consideration of art and religion necessitates the inclusion of artists and theologians. It is their transcendental orientation that provides the breeding ground, the nutrition for important ideas, like the idea of freedom. Again and again it has been these two groups which have bravely marched in the vanguard of the freedom movements, up to and including today.

References