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Search for Meaning in the Anthropocene: A Dialogue Between Psychology and Theology

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Background for the article: We have composed this article as a dialogue between a psychologist and a philosopher of religion. We believe that our various disciplines may contribute to a varied and nuanced understanding of what meaning entails in the context that the Anthropocene represents. Tatjana has done much research on meaning in life, whereas Jan-Olav is concerned with the meaning of religion in a contemporary context. We continue to discover that we have a lot of interests in common—also when it comes to dealing with the present state of planet Earth and our place in it as humans.

***Jan-Olav**: The Anthropocene as a call to orientation and transformation*

Although the notion of the *Anthropocene* was rejected as a description of our present age by scientists in 2024, it is still worth employing to depict some of the main features that presently characterize the planet. When Paul Crutzen launched it in 2002 (Crutzen 2002, 2006), he pointed to some of the geological-scale changes human actions have caused, such as how between a third and a half of the planet's land surface has been transformed. Moreover, most of the world's major rivers have been dammed or diverted, and fisheries remove more than a third of the primary production of the ocean's coastal waters, and humans use more than half of the world's readily accessible freshwater runoff (Crutzen 2002, 23). Thus, "humans are not passive observers of Earth's functioning: To a large extent the future of the only place where life is known to exist is being determined by the actions of humans" (Lewis and Maslin 2015, 178). Thus, the far-reaching changes that human actions cause to "the life-supporting infrastructure of Earth that may well have increasing philosophical, social, economic, and political implications over the coming decades" (ibid., 178). The Anthropocene is characterized by the fact that "the human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system" (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017, 4). It points to human power over the fate of the planet. It does not mean, however, that we can fully control or hamper the developments, control the consequences of our actions, or foresee in detail all that will happen. This experience of lack of control may, in fact, contribute to deterioration in the experience of meaning.

So, what happens with the sense of meaning in a situation like this one? Is the Anthropocene a testimony to the fact that it is humans alone that are the meaning-making species—those who create meaning on the planet by means of our activity, and also the loss of such when we face the threat of destruction and climate catastrophes? Or is the sense of meaning also something we have to detect and realize in other areas than those activities that have shaped the Anthropocene condition?

Because it may be considered raising the question about meaning in life in a way not yet seen, Anthropocene may also have religious and spiritual consequences. The lack of preparedness and immediately accessible resources for dealing with the situation characterizes many religious traditions, including the Christian. The spiritual resources accessible are, for the most part, developed insufficiently.[1] Nevertheless, moral and spiritual elements must be recognized as relevant to how we interpret and relate to the situation.[2]

Stephen Gardiner claims that the ongoing climate change, which is a consequence of the Anthropocene, manifests "a perfect moral storm" (Gardiner 2011, 2006). It impedes our ability to act morally. Our ability to act according to the values and norms we live based on, becomes impeded, a fact that also influences our experience of meaning. Furthermore, the situation is one in which there is "a

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serious asymmetry of power, where the possibility of some taking undue advantage of others is pronounced" (Gardiner 2011, 7). This asymmetry is not linked to specific areas but is global. The first element in the storm is marked thus: "Its key feature is that the world's most affluent nations, and especially the rich within those nations, have considerable power to shape what is done and to do so in ways which favor their own concerns, especially over those of the world's poorer nations, and poor people within those nations" (ibid.). The asymmetry is also a significant element in the second element Gardiner describes, namely that "the current generation has similar, but more pronounced, asymmetric power over the prospects of future generations: roughly speaking, earlier generations can affect the prospects of future generations, but not vice versa" (ibid). The final, third storm is theoretical: We lack robust general theories to guide us, he claims, writing that

> existing theories are extremely underdeveloped in many of the relevant areas, including intergenerational ethics, international justice, scientific uncertainty, and the human relationship to animals and the rest of nature. This not only complicates the task of behaving well, but also renders us more vulnerable to the first two storms. Each of the three storms hampers the cause of ethical action, and threatens to blow it seriously off course. But taken together they are mutually reinforcing, and the challenge becomes profound. (ibid)

Accordingly, we argue that the search for meaning in the Anthropocene is not only a question of understanding what we have done, but also a question about how we need to find meaning that not only will orient ourselves to the realities, but also actions that can transform the future to the better. Meaning is related to cognitive, emotional, and intentional elements that motivate human action. Thus, we also must ask if there are potential elements in the Christian tradition that can mediate action and practices that allow us to face the situation. Hence, a re-appropriation that leads to the development of practice-mediating symbols needs careful consideration of potential symbols and experiences with the environment. Such development needs to consider insights and critical lessons learned about the separation of humans from nature, and the realization about how there are other agents in nature than humans, who exist in their own right and whose interests we need to acknowledge for their own sake, and not only for the sake of our own survival. The fundamental tenet here is to understand humans as part of—and therefore participating in—the web of nature—with our capacity for making history. We do not exist separate from nature, but history and nature are weaved together in the totality that theology calls creation. Creation is about connecting and being connected, it is about participating in the sources of life and, therefore, also to participate in the sources of meaning.

Tatjana: For the longest time, the cycles of day and night, the seasons of the year, and the habitat determined what humans could do and what they had to do to survive and thrive. Roles and responsibilities were inherited within communities. With industrialization, these relationships dissolved. More and more people moved to cities, breaking away from family and other traditional community structures. Electricity turned night into day, and transport and storage facilities reduced dependence on seasonal cycles of sowing and harvesting. This onset of human disconnection from natural and social contexts during industrialization also marked the beginning of the Anthropocene, as claimed by Crutzen (2006); an epoch characterized by the extreme impact of human activity on the Earth's geology, ecosystems, climate, etc.

We see here a dialectic process of alienation and human self-empowerment. People's alienation from their labor made technological progress possible. Social alienation enabled individual autonomy and freedom; alienation from nature fueled its exploitation, as seen in the depletion of fossil fuels, factory farming, and the mass production of food at low prices.

A similar dialectic can be observed in relation to meaning of and in life. Secularization processes, which accompanied industrialization, entailed abandoning previously self-evident assumptions about a divine plan for this world. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche described this vividly:

> "Where is God gone?" he called out. "I mean to tell you! We have killed him—you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder?" (Nietzsche 2016, 125)

The lament reflects the experience of humans in modernity: the frame of reference has been lost. There is no longer a universal understanding of up and down. To many, the meaning of life—if it exists—is no longer accessible.

All meaning lost? From meaning of life to meaning in life

This development did and does not necessarily lead to despair. Alongside the industrial revolution, we also witnessed a revolution in human self-understanding. The Enlightenment encouraged individuals to make use of their reason: *Sapere aude* (Kant 1784, 481–494). The idea of God became a postulate to be put into practice, as Kant (1788) suggested. What do we believe to be true, good, and meaningful? It shows in its implementation, in what we do, and how we live. Thus, the meaning of life manifests in meaning *in* life—meaning incarnate, if you will.

Empirical research links the presence of meaning in life, also known as meaningfulness, with four specific elements of meaning: orientation, coherence, significance, and belonging (Schnell 2021). These existential experiences anchor us in life, provide existential grounding, and help us face life's challenges. Orientation stands for the direction I pursue in life. Like a compass, it is valuable for making decisions, committing myself, or setting boundaries. Coherence is present when my life makes sense to me: when I experience myself as having integrity with regard

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to my values and actions, my inner and outer self; when I can be myself and don't have to pretend or bend. Significance is the experience that I matter. I am not irrelevant; I count: I am recognized by others, I can make a difference, I find resonance. Belonging, in an existential sense, means having a place in this world, being part of something bigger than just myself (Schnell and Danbolt 2023).

The four elements of meaning—orientation, coherence, significance, and belonging—can draw on very different sources of meaning. Sources of meaning are orientations that motivate me to act, my purpose. They represent what I experience as ultimately true and good, what I am committed to, and into what I invest time and energy (Leontiev 2007; Schnell 2021). This covers religiosity and spirituality, but also many other orientations that focus on conservation or development, on myself, on close relationships or on a wider context, such as social commitment, nature relatedness, or generativity.

The fact that there are so many routes to meaning and that people in the contemporary West are free to choose their very own meaning in life contributes to autonomy and self-determination. At the same time, it poses a great challenge: How am I supposed to find out what is meaningful?

As meaning presumably is something positive, we expect it to feel good. Yet, the pursuit of happiness is neither promising when it comes to achieving happiness, nor does it lead to meaning (Mauss et al. 2011; Schnell 2021). In contrast to happiness, meaning is not an emotion. Experiences of meaning are grounded in sensations and emotions, actions, and encounters—but they are fundamentally based on an evaluation: from a meta-perspective, given where I came from and where I want to go, where *we* came from, and where *we* want to go: What is important, significant, what really matters? Meaning in life requires reflection: who am I and who do I want to be—as an individual and as part of a community? What do I understand by a good, meaningful life—for myself and others? What can I contribute to making this a reality?

These reflections demand self-honesty. They call for a critical view of ourselves and the world around us. However, this is something we humans like to avoid. To a certain extent, it is easier to go through the world with illusions. Psychology therefore refers to them as "positive illusions" (Taylor and Brown 1988), the assumption that I am perfect just the way I am—and actually even better than others ("above-average illusion"); that the world is fair ("just-world belief"); that we have everything under control ("illusion of control"); that everything will be fine, and change is not necessary ("unrealistic optimism").

Such assumptions strengthen our self-esteem; they allow us to take an optimistic view of the world and keep worry and fear at bay, at least in the medium term. In the long term, positive illusions prevent us from taking a realistic view of ourselves and the world. They thus keep us from acting appropriately. This is particularly harmful in situations of crisis where decisive action is required, such as with regard to climate change.

Moreover, positive illusions are "positive" only for those who can afford such biases—an affordance that is unevenly distributed. While people in the Global North often feel entitled to a sense of superiority and control, justifying even exuberant consumer behavior as deserved, the Global South endures the repercussions. The consequences are profound: communities face environmental pollution, economic exploitation, social disparities, and the impacts of climate change (see e.g., WHO 2021; WWF 2023).

Nevertheless, the narrative of "the world is ours, and we deserve it" is deeply woven into the Western self-image, making any challenge to these positive illusions feel like an unwelcome intrusion. A meaning orientation asks for a perspective beyond self-centered positive well-being. And yet we have fought for just this well-being, in a conquest over the environment, in the pursuit of material prosperity and the anthropocentric self-confidence that went with it. What is the way forward, from your perspective as a philosopher of religion, Jan-Olav?

Jan-Olav: I remain convinced that where we find meaning, is in relationships and experiencing connections with something more than ourselves. From a theological point of view, that is not only a connection with God, but also with the rest of creation. Your quote from Nietzsche makes this apparent: His experiences is one of profound disconnection and the concomitant lack of orientation, with the consequence that this also makes life less meaningful—and hence, we are thrown back on "creating meaning" in life instead of *finding meaning in relationships and connections*.

This view makes apparent one point that I think has both theological and philosophical significance: your research focuses on meaning *in* life, instead of the meaning *of* life. I think this focuses on the concrete life lived, with all its connections and relationships (or the absence of these), instead of a more generic and abstract approach. The generic approach may therefore be considered hard, if not impossible, to answer, whereas the question about the meaning of my personal life in the here and now—and its eventual absence—is something that is existentially relevant at another level and can be discussed in detail and with reference to individual circumstances. Thus, to look for meaning in life may be a more commendable approach when we speak about a meaningful life in the Anthropocene.

Moreover, when you point to how meaning is related to orientation, that resonates well with how I think about religion in general: religion is primarily about orientation and transformation, and not about believing in some doctrine. Doctrine is thus secondary to experiences that provide chances for orientation and transformation. Let me illustrate these initial points by elaborating further on what they may entail, in light of what Nietzsche and contemporary sociologist Hartmut Rosa writes.

Nietzsche articulates what is lost in terms of points of reference and orientation once humans stop believing in and relating to God as an instance of attachment. Positively, he interprets this as pointing to the limitless possibilities of humans no longer under control and restricted by any divine order—a position that reflects the Anthropocene. However, it also entails that the fundamental conditions for human orientation have disappeared. There is no longer any external instance that serves as comforting, providing warmth, comfort, and consolation. The death of God, the dissolution of attachment to God, leaves the human with no

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sense of direction—and no *means* of orientation.[3] Furthermore, and interesting if we see this as a tacit gesturing toward the present state, the event Nietzsche described as the death of God has not only positive implications for everyone but entails negative and frightful elements (cf. for more on this parable, see Henriksen 2022, 65ff.).

Nietzsche thus provides profound insight into what is lost in terms of orientation when God is no longer part of what makes it possible for humans to relate and connect to others, and we could add: to nature. Loss of meaning and disconnectedness belongs together. This can also be described in other terms: Alienation, or, theologically, as sin, here meaning that the human being is only referred to or occupied with herself. How to overcome such alienation?

What causes alienation, and how can we overcome it? To answer this point, we can look to sociologist Hartmut Rosa. Rosa sees the controlling approach to reality as an important element that causes alienation, and therefore loss of meaning. Against the backdrop of the Anthropocene, that is highly illuminating. For him, the chances for experiencing the world meaningfully is conditioned by what he calls experiences of *resonance*. The opportunities for such experiences are found in how we can relate to nature, art, and religion. Resonance entails a more intensified relationship with the world than what is found when we only relate to it in terms of control and domination. His main thesis is that "life is a matter of the quality of one's relationship to the world, i.e. the ways in which one experiences and positions oneself with respect to the world, the quality of one's appropriation of the world" (Rosa 2019, 5).

Similar to both Schleiermacher and William James, Rosa points to a basic "*feeling for the world*, which necessarily precedes their consciously formulated and articulated beliefs" (ibid, 12, our italics). He supplies a lengthy quote by William James to back up this claim:

> Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life [...]. Total reactions are different from casual reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree everyone possesses. This sense of the world's presence, appealing as it does to our peculiar individual temperament, makes us either strenuous or careless, devout or blasphemous, gloomy or exultant, about life at large; and our reaction, involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completest of all our answers to the question, "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?" (ibid, 12)

The claim in this quote suggests that how humans experience the world is conditioned by relationships that go both ways: our experiences in general may be both the cause for and the result of what we appropriate as adequate ways of understanding the world. However, the most important point here is that Rosa identifies the fundamental relationship we have with the world—and thereby also our experiences of it, in what I suggest calling *pre-subjective* conditions: That is, conditions that are prior to how we come to experience ourselves as *subjects with a substantive sense of self* in the world. I would argue that to experience oneself as a subject in this latter sense is the result of emotionally charged relationships that color and shape both self and world perception.

When it comes to experiencing the world as in resonance with oneself, it has to do with a fundamental experience of participation: it builds on a fundamental feeling of connection with different spheres of life, and the experience that it is possible to attain or affect something in each of these spheres. A person who relates to the world in this way can therefore feel

> that she herself can also be affected, can be touched. She allows herself to be touched, moved, gripped, not only by other people, but also by plants and mountains, by music and stories, by challenges. The development of intrinsic interests and self-efficacy beliefs, moreover, correlates with the experience of social recognition, and herein lies an obvious bridge to our resonance-based approach. Without love, respect, and esteem, our wires to the world – our axes of resonance – remain rigid and mute. (Rosa 2019, 9)

The social conditioning of experiencing being in resonance with the world should not get lost for us: love, respect, and esteem are elements that emerge out of positive relationships with other human beings. Hence, emotional relationships with others foster our ability to be in resonance with the world, and thereby, to experience it is a way where we feel deeply connected with it, and with its significance. Rosa can also speak of being "geared more toward creative receptivity, successful interactions, adapting the world to himself rather than mastering it" (ibid., 13). We can now qualify this notion further by speaking about a *positive experience of participation that is grounded in pre-subjective elements and relationships, which in turn also lead to a specific understanding of the world's character*. It is on this basis that a theological interpretation of the world can be articulated and provide means for both orientation and transformation.

Rosa sees the alternative to the participatory mode of being in the world in understanding one's relation with it in terms of antagonistic confrontation. Here, the relationship is understood based on a tension between subject and object. Here, "the images of the objective world appear as 'symbols for points of aggression'; action appears as domination, and reality per se as 'resistance'" (Rosa 2019, 13). Thereby, the relationship with the world is conditioned by seeing it as individual segments, "marked by an attitude of determination, domination, transformation, and conquest," and oriented toward expanding one's own knowledge and grasp, options and range of action.[4] Rosa adds further nuances in this picture when he argues that

> one's relationship to the world cannot be defined simply according to the fields in which one operates or the kinds of activities in which one engages, but

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> rather can be determined only via analysis of one's attitude toward and experience of the world. Whether or not a given subject manages to develop and maintain constitutive axes of resonance depends, first, on his or her (physical, biographical, emotional, psychological, and social) disposition; second, on the institutional, cultural, contextual, and physical configuration of the segments of world in which he or she operates; and, third, on the relationship between these two factors. Even those segments of the world that tend to be hostile to life, like deserts, snowscapes, and filling stations, can under certain conditions become genuine oases of resonance. Alienation, in the sense of a mute, cold, rigid, or failed relationship to the world, is, then, the result of a damaged subjectivity, social and object configurations that are hostile to resonance, or an imbalance or lack of compatibility in the relation between a given subject and some segment of world. (Rosa 2019, 15–16)

Experiences shaped by and manifesting resonance are not based only on horizontal and diagonal relationships. As indicated, Rosa also acknowledges responsive relationships "to the world, existence, or life as a whole that can be said to constitute the vertical dimension of resonance" (Rosa 2019, 40). Of course, these relationships are of considerable significance for religious experience, in terms of providing contexts of origin, identification, and justification/validation. In these, the subject's counterpart is "perceived and experienced as a totality that exceeds the individual. In experiences of vertical resonance, the world itself in a way obtains its own voice" (ibid.).

The metaphor Rosa uses here is important, because it allows him to say what happens in a world that has lost "metaphysical axes of resonance in the sense of a cosmological or theological resonant order" (ibid.). This loss has appeared after "the emergence of instrumental, rationalistic, and disengaged relationships to the world," which in turn means that "our cultural relationship to the world threatens to fall mute" (ibid.). However, it does not entail that modernity is devoid of spheres of resonance in which subjects can assure themselves of a responsive relationship with the world. Such spheres continue to exist, and among them are also modern forms of religiosity and spirituality.

The analysis above connects to a lot of what you are doing in your research, Tatjana, but it also carves out a more detailed space for religion in the constitution of meaning in life. I wonder what you think about the above.

Tatjana: I fully agree with your emphasis on the necessity of connectedness and orientation for finding meaning. However, I believe they need further qualification and reflection for living meaningfully and sustainably. Religion can have an important role here.

Let us first take another look at the proposed primacy of resonance, of connection, and participation. Although it is *theoretically* possible to distinguish between a participative and an antagonistic approach to the world, reality is more complex. People feel particularly connected—and oriented—in in-groups that set themselves apart from others, advocate a clear worldview while negating the validity of other worldviews, and question the equality of all people by implicitly or explicitly asserting their own superiority.

The "positive illusions" described above are reflected here in social processes. The louder and more convinced the primacy of one's own group, one's own nation, is proclaimed, the better it feels for many citizens. The claim of being in control is a populist standard and feeds the need for security. This is particularly relevant in polycritical times like the present. Perceived insecurity makes humans intuitively conservative, and blocks openness for novelty, diversity, and change (cf. Jost et al. 2007, Van Leeuwen and Park 2009).

It is not necessarily love and respect for each other that emerge out of such emotionally charged connectedness; in many cases, it is hate and disrespect. And indeed, collective hatred creates meaning. It motivates and activates, fosters enthusiasm and zeal, prevents doubt and insecurity—and increases a sense of meaning in life (Elnakouri, Hubley, and McGregor 2022) Military personnel report similar experiences during their deployment. Although war is disturbing, morally injuring, and traumatizing (Fischer et al. 2020), it can also be perceived as highly meaningful, as orienting and oriented, significant, coherent, and belonging (cf. MacLeish 2013; Orazem et al. 2017).

Resonance and meaning can be found in shared hatred, in aggression and war. Instead of relying on their emotional force, we need to focus on the context of their emergence, an awareness of the "why" and "for what purpose?", on the consequences of our action and the responsibility we assume when we act upon the freedom we have. These are existential reflections we are not used to, that need to be practiced.

Religion can provide valuable guidance here: a religion as you describe it, Jan-Olav, which does not emphasize doctrine but orientation and transformation—or rather "experiences that provide chances for orientation and transformation."

As your quote from William James so well describes, these are not everyday experiences. They are not intuitive, emotional reactions, but experiences that arise when we "go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence" (James 1985, 35).

Such an encounter with existence needs interpretation to make sense. The arising question of "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?" does not easily translate into "What is the character of this life we want to live?" Secular societies do not provide spaces dedicated to such exploration. Churches, on the other hand, are often associated with the very doctrinal orientation you mention. Their teachings, and even their terminology alone, can obscure access to the "ground," or "background," of existence. Paul Tillich therefore made a suggestion that may be termed "logoclastic":

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> And if that word [God] has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depth of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. (Tillich 1948, 59)

Religion can be a guide in the exploration of meaning, a companion on the journey into the depth of our lives (cf. Schnell 2015). This journey is not self-evident, static, or the same for everyone. It cannot be answered once and for all. Those who take it encounter themselves and the world anew, beyond illusions. They encounter not only beauty and wonder, but also fragility and brokenness, absurdity, and suffering (Schnell 2022).

A religion that is existentially aware can offer a lot here: safe spaces, welcoming ritual companionship, trustworthy people with time, compassion, and competence in existential conversation—people who have themselves confronted the depth of their lives, the sources of their meaning and being. In this way, beyond ideology and dogma, they can embark on a shared journey, to explore what is of ultimate concern, and to translate this into everyday life: into meaningful decisions and actions, attitudes, and hopes that lie beyond anthropocentric hubris and the illusion of control.

Jan-Olav: I think you point to some very important elements in your response, Tatjana. Especially two things are called for in our assessment of religion these days, and they may be even more obvious after the outcome of the recent election in the United States. First of all, the ambiguous character of religion must be acknowledged. Religion is not necessarily promoting a cluster of positive practices but may also contribute to a polarization that undermines social cohesion as well as personal development. Perhaps one of the points I therefore want to underscore is that religion must have a transformative element that allows peoples and communities to grow both spiritually and psychologically, and this is hard to see in versions of religiosity that engenders hatred and division. That might entail what you suggest: the willingness to let go of destructive images of God that we have learned are contrary to human flourishing.

This leads me to the second point: We need to see religions—including the Christian religion—as something that should be assessed according to its fruits. Then we cannot understand it merely as a way to safeguard doctrine. I see doctrine as a way to legitimize, justify, and explain Christianity as practices—and sometimes as a basis for criticizing practices, too (cf. Henriksen 2019). This means that also doctrines must be seen in light of how they contribute to orientations and transformations that allows communities to be shaped in ways that can foster a good society for all, and which also acknowledge our dependency on the life of the rest of the planet. I think this is the most pressing challenge to Christian spirituality in the present. It is probably only by observing these points that a Christian search for meaning can continue to be a viable option in the Anthropocene.

Tatjana: And, I'd like to add, by fostering a search for meaning that can be shared, independently of worldview. When religions succeed in translating their concerns in ways that can be understood and appreciated by secular individuals, those of other faiths, and not to mention their own adherents, they can bear significant fruit. Jürgen Habermas highlights this potential from a secular perspective. He views religions as a corrective to a modernity that has lost its grounding:

> Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization have caused utter devastation. (Habermas 2008, 6)

Yet in addition to the willingness of religions to translate their doctrine and question their real-life consequences, they also need conversation partners who are willing to engage in such a dialogue. Habermas describes this as an ongoing learning process for all sides. Hans-Georg Gadamer succinctly adds what is probably one of the greatest challenges in this process: "A conversation presupposes that the other person might be right" (Gadamer 2000).

I experienced our dialogue, Jan-Olav, as such an attempt to translate our own perspectives while seriously considering each other's positions. We have committed to exploring the effects of the Anthropocene, which not only exposes the environmental crises we face but also underscores the existential and moral dilemmas that accompany our current trajectory, in terms of experiences of meaning and meaningful action.

In a dialectical process of self-empowerment and alienation, people in our part of the world have severed many meaningful connections. We both agree that a meaningful life emerges from a caring engagement with the world, experienced as orientation, significance, coherence, and belonging. At the same time, we must acknowledge that these same experiences can also arise from discrimination, intolerance, or hostility toward those perceived as "the others." To prevent environments of hatred and division, we need reflective clarity about our own orientations—combined with a preparedness to take others' orientations seriously.

In this endeavor, a theological perspective can play a transformative role if it emphasizes relationality, interconnectedness, and responsibility and moves beyond the prevailing logic of exploitation and control. Instead of rigidly preserving doctrine, it can offer its competence as a companion for existence.

Endnotes

[1] For the diverse normative dimensions in the perception of the Anthropocene, see Antonaccio (2018).

[2] Excellent examples of how theology has been challenged to respond to its implications from other disciplines can be found in the various sequels to Lynn White Jr.'s seminal essay. See Spencer (2019), Taylor (2016), Taylor, Van Wieren, and Zaleha (2016), and White (1967).

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[3]This is a point made by both Arne Grøn and Werner Stegmaier, who speak of a radical loss of orientation as a topic in this aphorism. Moreover, Stegmaier also makes the interesting observation that Nietzsche's concern here is not religiosity or irreligiosity, but rather the place in which the alternative between them emerges. Cf. Stegmaier (2020, 59) and Grøn (2005, 399).

[4]Cf. Rosa (2019, 13) for an example of this separative attitude the analysis in Lisa Dahill's work on Bonhoeffer, as analyzed in Henriksen and Repstad (2023, 106ff).

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