

# From Golgotha to Oktoberfest Reading the Bavarian “Cross Decree” in Terms of the Social Imaginary

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*Abstract.* — *The paper discusses the so-called Bavarian Cross Decree implemented in 2018 as an attempt to establish identity narratives by recourse on religious symbols. It reads the decree in light of the differentiations resulting from the concept of the “Social Imaginary” in the sense of C. Taylor on the one hand, and of C. Castoriadis on the other. From this it infers three conditions that are needed for a stable attitude in face of the identitary temptation. It turns out that it is crucial to remain aware of the irreducible difference between the real and the ideal, to admit the contingency of the respective identity pattern and to take into account the unconscious as a factor of political action.*

In summer 2018, the Bavarian Government passed a decree on public office buildings, which was referred to simply as the *Bayerischer Kreuzerlass* (Bavarian Cross Decree) in the media. Curiously, the decree comprises only one sentence that was inserted into the existing General Rules of Procedure for Public Administration. This one sentence decrees that a cross needs to be displayed prominently in all entrance halls of Bavarian public offices.<sup>1</sup>

This might appear as a rather local issue, given that Bavaria is just one of 16 German Federal States, covering approximately 70,000 square kilometres in Germany’s southeast. However, the passing of this decree (together with the politics that surrounded it) can be read as paradigmatic for the reinvigorating attempts to meet the challenges of global (post)modernity by inventing pictures of unambiguous regional identities.

1. “§ 28 Allgemeine Geschäftsordnung für die Behörden des Freistaates Bayern (AGO) vom 12. Dezember 2000 (GVBl. S. 873; 2001 S. 28 BayRS 200-21-I), die zuletzt durch Bekanntmachung vom 24. April 2018 (GVBl. S. 281) geändert worden ist,” <http://www.gesetze-bayern.de/Content/Document/BayAGO-28> [accessed February 02, 2019].

The matter of displaying a cross in public space is obviously open to a wide variety of interpretations. Bavarian Prime Minister, Markus Söder, attempted to avoid ambiguity by choosing an explicative formulation which reads as follows:

As an expression of Bavaria's historical and cultural imprint a cross is to be hung up clearly visible in the entrance hall of all public office buildings ("Im Eingangsbereich eines jeden Dienstgebäudes ist als Ausdruck der geschichtlichen und kulturellen Prägung Bayerns gut sichtbar ein Kreuz anzubringen").<sup>2</sup>

This formulation has at least two implications: the first is almost counterintuitive and concerns the fact that the cross is supposed to be understood primarily in cultural terms, not religious ones. The second implication concerns the fact that the cross does not stand for Christian culture at large (beyond national and/or ethnic borders), but instead for the unique mishmash of Bavarian culture and the Roman Catholic Church. When confronted with the question of how this new provision might be able to express the state's ideological neutrality, the Prime Minister clarified that in his understanding "the cross is not a religious symbol," but that it expresses "a commitment to Bavarian identity."

Speaking in terms of "Bavaria's cultural imprint" is meant to imply that this culture has something like a homogeneous essence. Moreover, imbuing the cross as a "symbol of Bavarian identity" seems to suggest that one can gain access to the meaning of the cross in a manner divorced from its religious connotations. Both paths seem to oversimplify a much more complex reality.

Yet, it would be too easy to dismiss the citizens' need for a distinctive identity and the politicians' claim to correspond to this need as misguided ignorance with respect to the complexity of the present world. Moreover, the desire for identity turns out to be highly complex itself, since it seems to combine both emotional and intellectual facets, non-verbal and explicit elements in a complicated manner.<sup>3</sup> In order to find an adequate response to the challenges posed we, therefore, need to more closely scrutinise this complexity.

In what follows, I will analyse homogenous identity narratives by means of a concept that embraces both the pre-linguistic level of unconscious patterns and the narrative, reflective level of explicit orders – namely,

2. <http://www.gesetze-bayern.de/Content/Document/BayAGO-28>.

3. For a recent analysis of this phenomenon in context of the Identitary Movement, see José Pedro Zúquete, *The Identitarians: The Movement against Globalism and Islam in Europe* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

the concept of the *social imaginary* as it has been portrayed in different ways in the discipline of modern social theory. Having briefly introduced the general meaning of social imaginaries (section I), I will first elaborate (in sections II and III) on some aspects of Taylor's social imaginaries and how this concept might enlighten our understanding of both the genesis and structure of "identitary"<sup>4</sup> thought patterns. In addition (section III), I will provide an overview of Castoriadis' account of the social imaginary and what insights we might gain by dealing more adequately with the identitary temptation.

After it was made public, the Cross Decree gave rise to a vigorous debate among politicians and citizens, representatives from both the Catholic and the Protestant Church, academic theologians and civil-society organizations. On the one hand, the controversy focused on the question of how the religious and the cultural meanings of the cross relate to each other – and, parenthetically, whether the state or the church may claim the prerogative of interpretation on the meaning of religious symbols, such as the cross.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the discussion dealt with the legal question of whether the instruction is compatible with the state's principle of religious neutrality.<sup>6</sup>

The Cross Decree was repeatedly referred to as a matter of identity politics in both fields of the public debate.<sup>7</sup> This raises the question of which mechanisms are at work when religious symbols are equipped with a political meaning. This paper's hypothesis is that the concept of the Social Imaginary may serve as a promising tool by which to analyse the complex relationship between the political interest of offering identity

4. I use the term "identitary" in its broad sense, i.e. as characterizing an attitude focused on homogenous identity narratives (as opposed to its narrow sense as designating the anti-globalist, ethnopluralist and racist mind-set of the right-wing movement known as "the Identitarians").

5. Along these lines, the President of the German Episcopal Conference, Cardinal Marx, described the Decree as an "expropriation" (*Enteignung*) and emphasized that the State "is not entitled to explain what the cross means" (<https://www.dw.com/de/dann-wuerde-das-kreuz-im-namen-des-staates-enteignet/a-43586515-0> [accessed July 7, 2019]). There were, however, various church representatives who did not see any threat for the competency of the Church to interpret religious symbols (<https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/150324/01-06-2018/oekumenische-erklaerung-bayerische-theologen-unterstuetzen-soeders-kreuzerlass> [accessed July 7, 2019]).

6. In this sense, a group of 27 legal entities and natural persons took legal action (<https://weltanschauungsrecht.de/klage-kreuz-bayern-bfg-muenchen> [accessed July 7, 2019]).

7. Cf. e.g. an Interview with the Sociologist Armin Nassehi ([https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/bayerns-kreuzerlass-gilt-ab-heute-man-behandelt-das-kreuz.694.de.html?dram:article\\_id=419288](https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/bayerns-kreuzerlass-gilt-ab-heute-man-behandelt-das-kreuz.694.de.html?dram:article_id=419288) [accessed July 1, 2019]) or the essay by the Legal Scholar Hans Michael Heinig (<https://www.zeit.de/2018/35/kruzifixerlass-bayern-csu-verfassungsrecht/seite-2> [accessed July 1, 2019]).

patterns to the members of the community, the reason why religious symbols are considered to be attractive means to this end and the criteria that regulate the way in which political players employ religious symbols in a democratic context.

### I. The “Social Imaginary”

The notion of the *imaginary* evokes, at least on its surface, the connotation of painters and poets. We tend to connect – or even equate – the imaginary with the fictitious (as opposed to the real); with phantasy (as opposed to sober perception); with the realm of aesthetic creativity (as opposed to the hard stuff of everyday practice). The concept of the *social*, on the other hand, makes one think of unambiguous regulations and functional institutions that serve to organise and to guarantee the cooperation of individuals. One is inclined to presume that societies are shaped by analysable mechanisms so that all one can say about a society can be expressed in terms of social theory.

Incidents such as the Cross Decree illustrate that this dichotomy falls short of accounting for the complexity of social life. It arrives as a simple instruction, but it is one that is accompanied by an enigmatic story about what makes Bavaria Bavarian. This story, in turn, can neither be read as a theoretical description of the social conditions, nor can it be reduced to pure fiction. On the one hand, it seems that there is no society in the world whose identity could be summarised by one uncontested defining feature; on the other hand, it seems that there is also no society that is not actively involved in telling stories about itself.

The fact that Markus Söder declared the Bavarian Cross Decree to be a matter of “cultural identity”<sup>8</sup> may provide the key to clarifying the way in which collective narratives enfold their impact on a society and its members. Thus, social philosophy and anthropology have recently been inclined to refer to cultural beliefs as the “social imaginary.”<sup>9</sup> Among the key contributors to the formation of this concept are Cornelius Castoriadis on the one hand, and Benedict Anderson and Charles Taylor on the other.<sup>10</sup>

8. <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2018-04/markus-soeder-csu-kreuz-christentum-behoerden-bayern> [accessed July 1, 2019].

9. Cf. Claudia Strauss, “The Imaginary,” *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 3 (2006): 322-344, 322.

10. See e.g. Hans Alma and Guido Vanheeswijck, *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 1. – Strauss (“The Imaginary,” 326-329) adds

While each of these thinkers develops a specific sense of the social imaginary, one can consider the notion's commonality in that it refers to the kind of narrative underlying every social community that embraces verifiable statements about *how things are* as well as projective constructions about *how things could or should be*. It refers to those invisible images that are shared – consciously or unconsciously – within the respective social association that shape visible social practice. The social imaginary includes sediments of past experiences, as well as visions about our future opportunities; it concerns moral norms as well as unarticulated feelings.

Among the thinkers mentioned above, Taylor is the one who links the discussion of the social imaginary with the question about the role of religion in secular societies explicitly. Therefore, it seems prudent to begin with Taylor's definition here, given that the debate about the Cross Decree deals, from different angles, with the relation between cultural and religious dimensions of collective identity. In his book, entitled *Modern Social Imaginaries*, he offers the following formula:

By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.<sup>11</sup>

According to this definition, the social imaginary answers – first and foremost – the question of how we interpret the ways in which we interact with our fellow citizens. It concerns the ways in which we handle our mutual interdependence. Taylor points to the fact that drafting a shared identity involves far more than just the voluntary leisure activity of a few particularly creative romantics. Instead, it is one of the necessary preconditions that facilitates the very fact of social cooperation.

Jacques Lacan to this list, underlining that he, in contrast to the other three thinkers, problematizes the imaginary as a form of fantasy standing opposed to the real. Both Alma/Vanheeswijck and Strauss agree in considering Taylor and Anderson as one branch of theorizing the social imaginary, not only because Taylor explicitly states to “have obviously drawn heavily on the pioneering work of Benedict Anderson in his ‘*Imagined Communities*’, but also because – as Strauss points out – Taylor and Anderson likewise understand the social imaginary as “a concept that has spread well beyond the borders of any one group,” while Castoriadis takes the social imaginary to be “the central world view associated with a particular group, setting off one group from another” (Strauss, “The Imaginary,” 329).

11. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 23.

In the face of this insight, the crucial question is not how to avoid imaginary approaches to collective identities, but how to draw a distinction between those imaginaries that arose from the regressive need to escape to an idyllic world and those that emerged from a mature interest in providing an integral basis for social cooperation. After all, this is the line between those imaginaries that are conducive to the identitary temptation and those that can withstand it. In the following section, I will suggest three ideas that will guide our dealings with the social imaginary.

## II. Social Imaginary and Political Ideology

Designing a social imaginary is not congruent with giving an ideological account of a social association. Taylor himself describes this difference as follows:

So, what is the relation of a social imaginary to what Marxists call ideology, a distorted or false consciousness of our situation? The very use of a term linked to imagination invites this question; what we can imagine can be something new, constructive, opening new possibilities, or it can be purely fictitious, perhaps dangerously false.<sup>12</sup>

What Taylor states here is that the process of creating a common picture of a society is indifferent to the ideals of truth and of goodness. The very fact that we outline our common identity by virtue of our imagination neither tells us anything with regard to the question of whether the resulting draft is true or false, nor does it qualify our attempt as morally good or bad respectively.

In other words, the imaginary, as such, is irreducibly ambiguous: “Like all forms of human imagination, the social imaginary can be full of self-serving fiction and suppression, but it also is an essential constituent of the real.”<sup>13</sup> One and the same idea contained by our social imaginary can either serve to enlighten social life or to disguise its factual nature. Taylor illustrates this insight with respect to our notion of equal citizenship:

Take our sense of ourselves as equal citizens in a democratic state; to the extent that we not only understand this as a legitimating principle but actually imagine it as integrally realized, we will be

12. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 183.

13. *Ibid.*, 184.

engaging in a cover-up, averting our gaze from various excluded and disempowered groups or imagining that their exclusion is their own doing. We regularly come across ways in which the modern social imaginaries, no longer defined as ideal types but as actually lived by this or that population, are full of ideological and false consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Taken as an ideal, a democratic principle can transform our practice by effecting change to such an extent that our social interaction comes closer to the idea of democracy. On the other hand, talking about an ideal like equality can bemuse us in such a way that we end up ignoring the moments of inequality within our society, when it is mistaken as a description of the state of being. According to Taylor, the crucial question is whether or not we remain aware of the fact that “equality” is a “legitimizing principle” (or an “ideal type” respectively) and that we do not mix it up with a feature which is in fact “integrally realised.”<sup>15</sup>

This distinction allows us to specify further about the extent to which the instance of the Cross Decree resembles an identity gesture. It would have been one thing to articulate the quest for a unique symbol of Bavarian identity or the vision of a Bavarian population that is united by a common cultural ideal. Perhaps this search for a widely shared ideal might have initiated an open discourse about the self-understanding of the inhabitants of Bavaria, about their relation to history, about their view on culture, and – even though religion was not on the initiators’ agenda – about the role played by religious faith (of whatever denomination) in a secular society. In other words, the topic of a Bavarian identity, understood as a threshold value guiding our collective practice, would have had the potential of fostering an inspiring public conversation.

However, this chance has been missed. The decree does not consider the idea of regional identity as an ideal that provokes common reflection and the development of a shared social imaginary, but as a matter of fact. When the Prime Minister commented about the cabinet’s decision about the Cross Decree on his Twitter Account, describing it as a “clear confession to our Bavarian identity and to our Christian values,”<sup>16</sup> he suggested that both identity and values are clearly defined phenomena, rather than heuristic ideals. In this way, the Decree assumes an ideological shape.

14. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 183.

15. *Ibid.*

16. [https://twitter.com/markus\\_soeder/status/988768341820170240](https://twitter.com/markus_soeder/status/988768341820170240) [accessed July 1, 2019].

### III. The Social Imaginary and the Quest for Necessity

The main topic of Taylor's thinking is the "move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others."<sup>17</sup> Taylor recognises a significant change in the way in which we deal with the matters of identity among this process's manifold implications.

According to his observation, the fact that the premodern order was structured by a transcendent point of reference has a fundamental influence on the ways in which individuals describe themselves. As long as the political hierarchy counts as a divine institution, the individual will consider their own position within this hierarchy as strictly necessary.<sup>18</sup> Any reflection on identity is limited by the "inability to imagine the self outside of a particular context extended to membership of that society in its essential order."<sup>19</sup> According to Taylor, this kind of compelling interconnection between social order and individual identity is a significant aspect of what he calls "social embeddedness."<sup>20</sup>

In the context of modern societies, and in contrast to the aforementioned contention, the dominating self-description mirrors a rather "disembedded"<sup>21</sup> situation. While Taylor rejects the reconstruction of secularization in terms of linear disenchantment or subtraction theories, he nevertheless emphasizes that secularization eliminated the transcendent horizon of human self-interpretation without providing any adequate replacement thereto.<sup>22</sup> In this setting, the individual is confronted with the contingency of their way of life; alternatives are no longer unconceivable but, conversely, seem to be omnipresent. For Taylor, the phenomenon "that many of these *What would it be like if I were...?* questions are not only conceivable but arise as burning practical issues (...) is the measure of our disembedding."<sup>23</sup>

17. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

18. In this context, Benedict Anderson stresses the crucial role played by the religious understanding of language. While "the world" is supposed to be "so separate from language that all languages are equidistant" from the secular perspective, the classical religious view used to consider language as non-arbitrary "emanations of reality." This is why "the silent sacred languages were the media through which the great global communities of the past were imagined" for Anderson (Anderson, "Imagined Communities," 14).

19. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 55.

20. Ibid. – Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Ch. I.3.

21. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Ch. 4; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Ch. I.3.

22. Cf. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 192-193.

23. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 55.

Taylor makes clear that both the individual and modern society as a whole are challenged by the insight that they are anything but metaphysically necessary. While premodern societies considered themselves – at least tacitly – as pre-existent associations, i.e. as communities constituted independently from human will or historical development, modern societies exist by dint of the awareness that they came into being, at least partly, by accident. Taylor describes the consequence of this situation as follows:

There is something paradoxical about a people that can preside over its own political birth. What makes it that just these people belong together for purposes of self-rule? Sometimes, it is the accidents of history (...). Or else a people establishes itself out of the political choice for self-rule (...). But much of what we call nationalism is based on the idea that there is some basis for the unit chosen other than historical contingency or political choice.<sup>24</sup>

When viewed from this perspective, the very concept of the nation (and with it the idea of national identity) appears as a reaction to the irreversible loss of the grand narratives that used to imbue historical associations with timeless dignity. We are not satisfied by the brute fact that we are what we are; we long for a deeper explanation for a thing so meaningful as the existence of our society.

Seen from this angle we may read the Cross Decree as an attempt to cope with the contingency that underpins Bavaria's existence and to meet the desire for a solid and grave self-conception of the Bavarians. Taylor's diagnosis might help us to understand that the Cross Decree corresponds to a deep need for a transcendent, and thus stable, basis of collective identity. For what symbol would fit into this endeavour better than a symbol that has evoked the connotation with the transcendent for centuries?

Rudolf Voderholzer, Bishop of Regensburg, seemed to interpret the Decree along these lines when he commented, emphasizing that "in our Bavarian homeland, the cross is a pre-state fundament."<sup>25</sup> While Voderholzer does not take this aspect as a reason to criticize the Decree, other commentators attack the Decree for inconsistently downgrading the cross' religious meaning and making use of its connotations with the transcendent. In this sense, for example Claudia Lücking-Michel, Vice President of the German Committee of Catholics (ZdK) ironically

24. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 176-177.

25. <https://www.bistum-regensburg.de/news/bischof-rudolf-voderholzer-das-kreuz-gehört-in-den-oeffentlichen-raum-6029/> [accessed July 1, 2019].

commented that the Decree might be better served by having the Prime Minister “nail leather trousers to the wall.”<sup>26</sup>

#### IV. The Social Imaginary and the Unconscious

For the last aspect of my consideration I will turn to the Greek philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997). Castoriadis develops his understanding of the social imaginary by referring to a realm of thinkers who differ significantly from Taylor’s theoretical background. Among others, he consults Freud’s psychoanalytical approach and brings the social imaginary in touch with the semantic surrounding of the unconscious.

The fact that Taylor and Castoriadis differ significantly in their definitions of the social imaginary may evoke the question of whether it is methodologically appropriate to refer to the two conceptions without a detailed discussion of their similarities and differences. One might argue that in order to employ the two accounts of one and the same purpose ignores the complexity of their incompatible semantics. That being said, I shall leave aside these methodological restrictions and commit myself to a rather selective reading of Castoriadis’ work, given that I presume that the implications of the unconscious may add a meaningful dimension to the analysis of identity structures.

Castoriadis introduces the social imaginary as the realm of *meanings*.<sup>27</sup> For him, the imaginary is a genuine part of reality; however, unlike in its logical-empirical dimension, the real is not constituted by univocally determined entities in its imaginary dimension, but by identifiable – but undeterminable – meanings. Every single meaning is not constituted by a linear definition, but by its innumerable connections to other meanings, given that every meaning refers to various other meanings.

Castoriadis insists on the imaginary’s reality, while at the same time underlining the holistic emergence of its constitutive elements. In so doing, he agrees with Taylor that the imaginary cannot be reduced to a pre-rational sentiment, but that it embraces a connection with our rational behaviour as well as a sphere of pre-linguistic being. In contrast to Taylor, however, he puts a clear emphasis on the latter aspect. For Castoriadis,

26. [https://weltkirche.katholisch.de/Aktuelles/20180518\\_Katholiken\\_sind\\_starke\\_politische\\_Akteure](https://weltkirche.katholisch.de/Aktuelles/20180518_Katholiken_sind_starke_politische_Akteure) [accessed July 2, 2019].

27. Cf. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Das Imaginäre: Die Schöpfung im gesellschaftlich-geschichtlichen Bereich,” in id., *Das imaginäre Element und die menschliche Schöpfung: Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Lich: Edition AV, 2008), 25-46, 34 (translation: A. Langner-Pitschmann).

the imaginary's specific force derives from the fact that it radically supersedes the categories of our conscious mind. Referring to Freud, he points out:

The unconscious (...) knows neither the time nor the contradiction. (...) The unconscious is a "place," where time (...) does not exist; where the contradictory elements do not exclude each other, more precisely: where we cannot even talk about the "contradicting"; a place that isn't a place in its actual sense, since that would presuppose order and distinctiveness.<sup>28</sup>

The unconscious is, in other words, a totality that runs counter to any kind of analysis or categorisation. It contains the sum of all actual and potential representations we do or which we might only have in our minds. Consequently, its content cannot be defined by any distinct limits whatsoever.

The social imaginary displays the structure of the unconscious in Castoriadis' view. As he emphasizes, the unity of a society is constituted by the pre-logical realm of the common imaginary:

Thus, there is a unity of the overall social situation; and looking closer we find that this unity is, after all, the unity and internal coherence of the tremendously complex fabric of *meanings* that permeate, direct and guide the whole life of the respective society (...). This fabric is what I call the *magma of social imaginary meanings* (...).<sup>29</sup>

Castoriadis considers that the social imaginary eludes analysis by rational categories, even though it forms the very basis of our social practice. This practice, again, can indeed be reflected upon through our concepts and classifications. However, if Castoriadis is right in equating the social imaginary with the unconscious, and by considering it to be the key to our social cooperation, then we will have to accept the idea that our social decisions are grounded in a realm that is hidden from the light of our rational thinking.

As Freud teaches, this does not mean that human beings are not responsible for what they do. What it does mean is that responsibility works a bit differently from what one is inclined to presume. To be responsible in this sense means to dismiss the false idea that all of those ideas about ourselves result from our brilliant logical skills. In the case discussed here, it involves recognising that, other than the proponents of the Cross Decree mentioned, the unity of the Bavarian society is not

28. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 457.

29. Castoriadis, "Das Imaginäre," 30.

grounded in any kind of objective necessity. Instead, their sense of belonging is rooted in the fact that Bavarian citizens – like the citizens of any other social community – meet in a realm of pre-logical, but immensely colourful, images about themselves.

Taking responsibility in politics requires both humility in the face of the unconscious imaginary's power and the willingness to handle the political impulses that derive from this sphere with special care. Such an attitude forbids the equalization of a religious symbol, like the cross, bearing a vast treasure of existential meanings, straightaway with the trademark of a regional culture.

## V. Conclusion

Identitary gestures, i.e. political symbols and narratives that offer a clear-cut, and thus attractive, self-description to a social community may seduce its citizens into ignoring the complexity of their social reality for the sake of an apparently unshakeable identity. The reconstruction of such gestures in terms of the social imaginary suggests that there are – among others – three strategies to evade their temptation.

First, as the discussion of the relation between social imaginaries and ideological pictures has made clear, withstanding the identitary temptation requires one to remain aware of the difference between ought and is, i.e. to deal sensitively with the difference between the ideal and the real.

Secondly, oversimplified identity pictures find fertile ground in the loss of necessities brought about by the process of secularisation, as the reconstruction of Taylor's analysis of secularized situations as "disembodied" situations has shown. In order to avoid the regressive aspects of identitary fantasies, one needs the skill to welcome one's own contingency as proficiently as one can and to handle its unsettling aspects in a creative and self-confident manner.

Thirdly, against the backdrop of Castoriadis' understanding of the social imaginary, the 'identitary temptation' appears as a typical case of a retrospective formulation of an imaginary meaning. Castoriadis' account reveals that to withstand the identitary temptation requires the adopting of a new approach to the unconscious dimensions of existence. We must, first and foremost, accept the idea that the unconscious is an important player in our social interaction, over and against our basic inclination to control our lives. At the same time, we have to distinguish carefully between its creative inputs, on the one hand, and its destructive

outputs, on the other. Political responsibility implies the willingness to be alert to the strong, but ambiguous, impact of unconscious images on our collective self-conception.

Leading representatives of both the Catholic and the Protestant Church in Germany reacted to the Cross Decree by claiming that the interpretation of religious symbols is, in the first instance, the task of the Churches' theological competency.<sup>30</sup> In this context, they underlined that from a theological perspective, the fact that the cross implies the ethical imperative to consider the interests of the weak and the humiliated cannot be ignored.<sup>31</sup> As a – highly tentative – outlook of my paper, I suggest going even further and indicating the extent to which the message of the Gospel may provide some resources to meeting the three aforementioned requirements.

As to the first, it is not just Eschatology, but all Christian doctrine in fact, that concerns the tension between how things are and how things ought to be. The central theme of the discourse about the kingdom of God concerns both the ability to continually discern between the real and the ideal and the ability to cope with the irreducible tension implied in this difference. Whenever Christian believers pray the Magnificat, they are confronted with the task of recognising, in the *indicative* discourse of justice, the *imperative* to transform reality into a place of fair cooperation. In this sense, it seems worthwhile to reflect on the structure of Christian faith as a test for the ability to deal with the tension that arises when people acknowledge both the persisting gap between reality and ideal and the normative impact of that ideal upon reality.

The second requirement, a positive attitude towards contingency, may be said to find its correspondence in the idea of God's incarnation. It is the very heart of Christian faith that God – whom the scholastics characterise as “the necessary being” – embraces human contingency by becoming human himself. If the observation is true that identity gestures are, among others, a stress reaction to our own randomness, then it might be worthwhile to reflect further on the extent to which the theological concept of a God who recognises necessity and contingency in the ultimate reality, may represent an encouraging starting point to overcome the identity reflex.

30. Cf. footnote 5.

31. See e.g. the statement of the President of the Protestant Bishops in Germany, Heinrich Bedford-Strohm <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/150105/20-05-2018/bedford-strohm-kreuz-steht-nicht-fuer-politische-ueberzeugungen> [accessed July 12, 2019].

Finally, the requirement to adopt an open perspective about the unconscious grounding of social practice implies the ability to deal with the ineffable without getting either bored or frightened. It presupposes the skill to face the ambiguity of a hidden reality and to remain alert to its traces in our lives. It goes without saying that the concept of the unconscious and the concept of God differ in significant aspects. However, regarding the fact that they challenge human beings to take some opaque preconditions of their practice into account, there seems to be a strong analogy. Both facing the darkness of the unconscious and facing the mystery of God require the willingness to stand the uncertainty resulting from the ineffability of the respective counterpart. In this sense, one could – with great caution – ask whether Christian faith, in the sense of a continuous attempt to understand one’s existence in the light of the trinitarian God, may provide a deep well of previous experience in this challenging task.

Quite obviously, the three suggestions indicated here presuppose a form of religiosity that refrains from any kind of fundamentalist simplicity. It is a commonplace notion that the inner space of religious communities offers room for exactly the same temptation that political communities are confronted with. The images of the Christian religion – like the images of any religion whatsoever – are highly ambivalent: They invite those who search for simple recipes for their lives as well as those who seek the empowerment to stand the complexity of life. It seems a worthy task to strengthen the latter group by reconstructing the Christian faith as a language through which one can make sense of the challenges to cope with the discrepancy between the real and the ideal, to welcome contingency and to be alert to the power of the unconscious.

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