RACISM AND CHRISTIAN BELIEF: 
A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The empirical evidence that religion is associated with increased prejudice, ethnocentrism and racism, rather than with increased love and tolerance, is for psychologists and sociologists an important scientific fact, but for theologians a source of uneasiness and a true challenge. If theology is a reflection on the religious experience of people, and if theologians see themselves in the service of genuine religiosity, how should this disturbing relation between religion and ethnocentricity be dealt with? The significance of the work of the Centre for Psychology of Religion at Leuven, presented in this volume, is that it helps the theologian to acquire a much deeper empirical understanding of this complex reality. Its originality consists in introducing a psychological approach into the Dutch-Flemish tradition, without however neglecting social identity theory. The Dutch-Flemish discussion has, until now, indeed been dominated by a sociological approach. This new approach reveals that it is insufficient to measure whether or even to what degree a person is involved in religion, but that one also needs to measure how a person deals with or approaches religion. The result is a much more complex view of the relation between religion and racism, which can then transcend apologetic discussions about whether or not religious people, as a sociological category, are more or less racist than others, and which thereby opens up the possibility of genuine theological reflection.

The central conclusion of the Leuven psychologists is that merely determining that someone is or is not religiously involved does not automatically indicate anything about his/her ethnocentrism or racism. Thus it is no longer possible to argue simply that the dividing line between racists and non-racists runs between religious belief and no religious belief (quite apart from the question of which side of the divide would be racist and which would not). Instead, the presence or absence of racism depends on the way in which the person experiences his/her religious involvement. In other words, in this research, the social identity processes reveal themselves as subject characteristics: meaningful conclusions are only possible if those within the group of religious believers are classified on the basis of how they individually engage with religion.
RACISM AND CHRISTIAN BELIEF

Four of the conclusions of the research strike me as particularly important for further theological reflection:

1. Racism is clearly influenced by religious orthodoxy, which is in turn mainly influenced by religiosity as a way of life, and which also seems to be a possible outlook, though to a lesser degree, when religiosity is seen as not so important.

2. Racism is also influenced, but to a lesser degree, by an attitude of external critique towards religion, which is in turn influenced by religiosity as of secondary importance in life.

3. Historical awareness in religious belief (which is distinguished from relativism) is not related to racism, and is itself strongly influenced by religiosity as a way of life.

4. Not considering religion important seems to preclude a historically aware approach to religion.

Because such conclusions fundamentally depend on how people's religiosity is classified by the psychologists, our reflection must begin with these distinctions. Four categories were used. Because religious orthodoxy (1) and external critique towards religion (2) are both positively correlated with racism (.44 and .19 respectively), one can ask what these two attitudes have in common, as well as what distinguishes these from religion with historical awareness (3) and relativism (4). Since historical awareness (and relativism) are not intrinsically related to racism, one should ask what is characteristic of this religious attitude. A theology that is concerned with humanity can find here then a criterion, supported by 'empirical' evidence, for critically examining concrete religiosity.

Both orthodox and externally critical persons long for certainty, experience feelings of anxiety and anomy, and have difficulty with symbolic thinking. Historical relativists, on the other hand, refer to their relation to the absolute as a searching process in which there is room for doubt and for a constant renewal of perspectives and complementary interpretations of (religious) reality. I will argue that the main religious viewpoint of orthodox and external-critical persons is characterised by 'closedness', and that of historical relativists by 'openness.'

To escape the conflicts and unsolvable ambivalences of existence, people tend to withdraw from complex and broken reality, taking refuge in safe and unquestionable politico-religious convictions. In the closedness of such positions, people find a secure constellation of unchangeable truths that gives foundation to their anxious (individual or collective) existence. Here truth, religious or otherwise, is not the result of a dynamic process of critical and