

Philosophical Atheism and Incommensurability of Religions in Christian Francken's Thought

Divergent claims for religious certainty created acute social problems in early modern Europe. Beside the shocking practical answers to the challenge of religious diversity in the form of religious wars and persecutions, there were also attempts for a theoretical treatment of these issues. If the theoretical solutions were to avoid skepticism, they had to develop the idea of reducing religious plurality to one religion hiding “behind” the manifold forms of religious experiences, rites and institutions. No matter whether this unique religion was described as *natural* or as *rational*,¹ it assured a hypothetical harmony among divergent claims for religious certainty, as well as religious peace from a practical point of view. Moreover, this tendency towards unifying religious plurality implied a stabilization of rational theology,² that is constructing a discursive theory of God within the realm of philosophy established through natural reasoning. In other words, early modern criticism of empirically different religious certainties and institutions could not result in atheism theoretically. Grotius' famous claim that natural values and norms would be obligatory even if we would hypothetically allow for the non-existence of God³ remained a mere hypothesis. The noble aim of eliminating the horrible social consequences of religious diversity required a strong theoretical concept of God, against the background of which divergent claims for religious certainty were commensurable with each other.

This paper gives an outline of the problem of religious commensurability in the work of the little-known German philosopher Christian Francken (1552–1610?). Beside his importance for Hungarian intellectual history, his writings deserve our attention because of the doctrines he formulates concerning reli-

¹ Cf. Jean Bodin's symptomatic statement: “rectam rationem et naturae legem ad hominis salutem sufficere”, Bodin, ca.1590/1857, 172.

² I rely on Winfried Schröder's phrase: “Stabilisierung der Rationaltheologie”, Schröder 1998, 123–132, especially 124.

³ Grotius 1625, Prolegomena [n.p.]: “Et haec quidem quae jam diximus [*scil.* concerning natural law – JS] locum haberent, etiam si daremus, quod sine summo scelere dari nequit, non esse Deum”.

gious unity and plurality. Francken perceived the problem of religious diversity clearly and was fascinated by the possible vision of religious peace—both inside and outside of Christianity. At the same time, he developed an outstanding thought-experiment of atheism. My paper investigates the tensions between his main concerns, between the ideas of religious tolerance and theoretical atheism. Accordingly, I will not discuss whether Francken's atheistic argumentation⁴ is valid—to be sure, it was powerful indeed under the philosophical preconceptions of his time. Rather, I intend to describe some consequences regarding his concept of tolerance, accepting the validity of his critique of rational theology without going into further details concerning rational theology itself.

The subsequent chapters give an account of the atheistic line of thought in Francken's *Disputatio* and its consequences regarding the idea of tolerance in the field of political and religious speech in his *Spectrum*. My closing conclusion describes why his theoretical atheism implied that the systems of values are expressed in respectively incommensurable political and religious usages of speech which cannot be intermediated. According to Francken's radical view, Grotius' claim is theoretically false: denying the existence of God as the highest instance of the intellectual order of natural values eliminates intellectual normativity of laws.

I. THE *DISPUTATIO INTER THEOLOGUM ET PHILOSOPHUM DE INCERTITUDINE RELIGIONIS CHRISTIANAE*⁵

Francken's *Disputatio* is a unique document of early modern criticism of rational theology. It has been subject to divergent interpretations: historians of literature treated it as a satirical pamphlet,⁶ experts of religious history saw an extreme product of radical reformation in it,⁷ and some scholars presented the work as an expression of a hidden stream of Renaissance libertinism.⁸ Although these approaches deliver important aspects for the interpretation of the *Disputatio*, its destructive strategy against rational theology can be reconstructed from a pure philosophical point of view.⁹

⁴ Main line of argumentation will be discussed below, for a detailed interpretation see Simon 2008, 68–134.

⁵ The text was handed down to us only in a single manuscript in the Library of the University of Frankfurt an der Oder, for philological details cf. Keserű 1982 and Simon 2008, 23–34. References follow my modern edition, Francken 1590/2008a.

⁶ Keserű 1982.

⁷ Szczucki 1972 and 1977.

⁸ Paganini 2014 and Biagioni 2010, 2014.

⁹ Simon 2008, 68–134 and Biagioni 2017, 108–134. According to Mario Biagioni, Francken's critique of theism is motivated by scepticism, cf. Biagioni 2010 and 2013; for my opposite view cf. Simon 2013.

The basic philosophical experience in the decades preceding the appearance of Descartes' new philosophy concerns the discontinuity of sensual experience and metaphysics.¹⁰ Different interpretations of this discontinuity emerged in sciences and in social life. Regarding this intellectual situation, it was perhaps Tommaso Campanella who gave the most typical reaction to it, as he developed a new metaphysics construed on his teacher's, Bernardino Telesio's empirical tendencies.¹¹ Metaphysics functioned as theoretical ramification of a fragmented empirical experience.¹²

Francken introduces his radical criticism of rational theology in the context of the discontinuity between sensual experience and metaphysics. However, the German philosopher places the conflict between experience and metaphysics in the field of theistic arguments.¹³ In general, Francken lets the theistic reasoning based on experience untouched and emphasizes that the world-causes approved by the different cosmological and teleological argumentations cannot be identified with God. Francken describes God as "the highest perfection without any imperfection" (*omnis perfectio sine imperfectione, perfectissimum sine omni imperfectione*)¹⁴. Accordingly, neither the Aristotelian First Unmoved Mover,¹⁵ nor the Platonic One¹⁶—emanating the spiritual and physical spheres of the world—, nor the perfect world of the Stoics,¹⁷ nor the First Cause of the Latin Aristote-

¹⁰ Mulsow 1998, 30–35; Boenke 2005, 191–197.

¹¹ Ernst 2010, 200–210.

¹² Cf. Boenke's interpretation of Campanella's metaphysics, in Boenke 2005, 171–209.

¹³ Regarding literary form, the *Disputatio* has two protagonists: a Theologian and a Philosopher. The Theologian explores 37 arguments for God's existence, each of which are refuted by the Philosopher.

¹⁴ Francken 1590/2008a, 173–179.

¹⁵ "Vitiosa est ratio falso consequente. Nam etiamsi moventia, non sint infinita, non id imo sequitur esse primum movens immobili. Potest enim primum movens movere seipsum, ut ait Plato. Deinde esto, sit primum movens immobile: non tamen hinc colligitur esse Deum. Nam potest aliquid esse immobile, et tamen non omnis esse perfectio sine imperfectione", *ibid.*, 176–177.

¹⁶ "Vitiosa est ratio multis modis; inprimis enim non est necesse, ut supra substantiam corpoream sit spiritus, cum ex antiquis multi dicant omnem substantiam esse corpoream, nec ullum hinc sequatur impossibile, eam autem, quae vocatur spiritus, corpus esse subtile; unde et aer vocatur spiritus: *Os meum aperui* - inquit ille - *et attraxi spiritum* [cf. Ps. 118, 131 – JS]. Deinde esto, sit spiritus: non est necessarium, ut sit factus; nam Aristoteles et alii dixerunt substantias spirituales non esse factas, nec ullum hinc sequitur impossibile: non continua ut sint factae, non continua sequitur esse a Deo. Quia Avicenna sine ullo impossibili consequente docuit intelligentiam secundam produxisse tertiam, hanc quartam et sic deinceps. Sed sint etiam omnia facta a quodam primo: non tamen sequitur adhuc illud esse Deum. Nam Deum vocamus omnem perfectionem. Potest autem aliquid esse primum, non tamen omnis perfectio", *ibid.*, 175–176.

¹⁷ "Esto, sit perfectissimum: illud erit mundus, ut Timaeus et stoici dixerunt; mundus autem non potest esse Deus verus (cum sit omnis perfectio sine imperfectione), quia materialis, corruptibilis. Quod si dicas dari debere perfectissimum, simplex, id, quod sit Deus, nihil valet. Nam etsi in genere eorum, quae habent imperfectiones, datur aliquod ceteris prestantius, non tamen necesse, ut aliquid sit perfectissimum sine omni imperfectione", *ibid.*, 175.

lians—which alone is capable of producing¹⁸ and sustaining¹⁹ the immensity of the world—can be identified with the “the highest perfection without any imperfection”. In each of these cases Francken allows for hypothetical argumentations for the existence of a highest cause of the universe which stands in a causal relation with the structure of the world available for us through our empirical knowledge and cosmological reasoning. However, these inferences take always the experience and the sensual data from change and movement as a point of departure. On the contrary, God’s metaphysical concept as “the highest perfection without any imperfection” is not a result of cosmological approaches, but emerges within the frameworks of *formal ontology*.

In this sense, Francken alludes to the Scotist metaphysics of Late Scholasticism which treated formal ontology as a science that expresses a formal analysis of beings.²⁰ Beings are constituted metaphysically, that is, regardless of the very causal contexts they are actually embedded in—considering causal phenomena as objects of natural philosophy instead treating them in metaphysics or formal ontology. Accordingly, the extreme ontological instance of the constitution of things is not identified with God as the highest cause, but with the minimal feature of Being as Being²¹—*ens inquantum ens, to on hē on*—, that is the most general but ontologically the weakest property of each thing.²² The proper object of metaphysics consists in the formal explication of this most general as well as most minimal feature. Being as being is segmented into inner modes which are interrelated to each other as transcategorical dispositions of Being as such. One of these modes is infinity. In formal ontology God is infinite Being, and at the same time God is “the highest perfection without any imperfection” regarding it from the perspective of the entities of created world.

This difference between the causal-cosmological and the formal approaches towards God’s metaphysical existence reveals the confrontation between Thomist and Scotist trends in Late Scholastic philosophy.²³ In contrary to Francken, Descartes was later congenially able to fit these old elements in such a way that the gap between Thomist cause of the universe and the formal-ontological Scotist principle of the world was bridged, and at the same time the resulting

¹⁸ “Falsum antecedens ex Aristotelis sententia. Hoc Xenophanis et nonnulli alii coelum posuerunt primam causam. Deinde esto, sit talis mundus, falsa est consequentia. Nam est effectus finitus finitae perfectionis. Cum fieri potuit a causa finita. Nullam enim hinc sequitur impossibile. Deus autem finitus est idolum ab homini fabricatum”, *ibid*, 176.

¹⁹ “Contineri potest ab alio [scil. mundus – JS]: A natura coeli ambiente universa: a natura elementorum, si non esset coelum”, *ibid*, 178.

²⁰ Cf. Honnefelder 1979.

²¹ As Honnefelder formulates: „ein Minimum an Seiendheit”, Honnefelder 1990. 6.

²² Duns Scotus 1895, 113–115 (*Quodl.* q. 3, n2–3).

²³ Cf. Honnefelder’s chapter on Suárez (*Systematisierung der Metaphysik: die Deutung der Seiendheit als aptitudo intrinseca bei Francisco Suárez*) in Honnefelder 1990, 200–294.

metaphysics was compatible with the new mechanical sciences as well.²⁴ In contrary to Scotism, the ascending branch of ideas regarding their objective reality²⁵ as formal constituencies of things does not end in an unproblematic idea of *Being as such*, but in the problematic idea of an *infinite Being*. The idea of infinite Being would be unproblematic if the relationship between the ideas could be described as a causal connection. However, Descartes denies this causality among ideas because, according to him, causality is a transfer of formal reality and ideas as mental states are effects of mind (and not of other ideas). Descartes' well-known solution introduces God as the cause of the mental state having the idea of infinite Being. Formal ontology of things expressed in ideas regarding their objective reality ends in the cause imposing an effect on the mind that conceives infinite being. Descartes casts away cosmological causality in Scotist fashion but restores God's, the highest cause's, position in his system following Thomist metaphysics.

Francken was not able to outline this solution concerning the two types of metaphysics, but instead, he brought the difference between the perspectives of formal ontology and of cosmological metaphysics to its extreme consequences. Similarly to Descartes, Francken was convinced of the fact that cosmological argumentations cannot meet the requirements of the concept of God established by formal ontology. He saw no way out of this metaphysical conflict: he answered the question by stating atheism and denying the possibility of unique and coherent metaphysics.

II. THE *SPECTRUM*²⁶

Francken wrote his essay *Spectrum* parallel to *Disputatio* around 1590–1591. While exploring some implications of his atheistic undertaking, his main concern here is to describe a sphere of politics which is not secured by a solid metaphysical background.

I have to refer to some historical events which gave rise to Francken's essay.²⁷ The *Spectrum* is the last document of a long, politically motivated intellectual polemic in Eastern Europe. On 12th December 1586 Stephan Báthory, king of Poland of Transylvanian origin, died in his hunting castle in Grodno, Lithuania. The late king's two physicians accused each other of abuse of therapy, later of intended poisoning of the former ruler. Eventually, religious charges displaced

²⁴ As in the Third Meditation, see Descartes 1964, 34–52, especially 40–46.

²⁵ The problem of objective reality of ideas in Descartes' philosophy is essential to every approach of its interpretation. I set aside the huge literature concerning this question and refer only to Wells 1990.

²⁶ References to this work follow my modern edition as well, cf. Francken 1590/2008b.

²⁷ For details see Simon 2008, 34–42.

medical accusations: the participants charged each other with being atheists. Francken engaged in the debate in 1589 with an apology²⁸ for the Swiss physician Giovanni Muralto (†1602). Muralto served the Báthori family in Transylvania and was accused of atheism as well. In its final version, Francken's *Spectrum* in ca. 1591 contained no reference to the deceased king, but analysed the political use of the term "atheism" as it had appeared during the five years of the preceding debate. Francken's essay is pervaded by an emancipative tone, he absolved even Simone Simoni (1532–1602), his polemical partner, of being atheist because he thought the term in its proper sense cannot even be applied to figures of Antiquity who had been usually denounced as atheists in the tradition.²⁹

The *Spectrum* formulates an unprecedented concept of tolerance in the 16th century. God's theological and metaphysical concepts are separated.³⁰ God's metaphysical concept in its Anselmian formula (*than which nothing greater can be conceived*) is normatively given to each member of mankind.³¹ The examination of God's general concept belongs to the competency of metaphysics, not to that of theology.³² Theologies are mere applications of God's unique metaphysical concept. The interpretation of the different applications, i.e. of theologies, is the task of the psychology and sociology of religion, so in this framework theology is reduced to the psychology and sociology of religion. In this model, the gods of the different theologies are in fact objects of the same fear and honour: a unique psychology of religion³³ is able to substitute religious differences and account for the false uses of 'atheism' in interconfessional accusations.

All of those are called *religious* who conceive that concept of God [God's metaphysical concept – JS] reverently and with religious piety, that is, who *apply* it on a certain invisible, eternal, infinite substance who sees everything, rewards the virtues and punishes for the sins. Therefore neither the Jew, nor the Mohammedan nor

²⁸ Muralto[-Francken] 1589.

²⁹ "nullus unquam hominum dicendus erit atheus, nam et Philosophi illi, ut Eumerus, Prodicus, Critias Atheniensis, Bion, Stilpon, Diagoras Melius, qui Deos sustulisse dicuntur, crediderunt, atque adeo sciverunt esse aliquid in mundo, quo nihil sit melius aut maius, habuerunt ergo illi etiam notionem DEI", Francken 1590/2008b, 194–195.

³⁰ "Verus et purus Theologus non iactat scientiam sed fidem, nam Theologia ut a Metaphysica distinguitur, fides est", *ibid.*, 194.

³¹ "Verum cuiusmodi est ista, quam tantopere iactas, notio Dei? Respondebis, ni fallor, cum Anselmo, omnes homines id statuere DEUM, quo nil maius, aut melius sit, nec cogitari possit", *ibid.*

³² "Dei autem notio illa omnium mentibus impressa, quae in scientiam cadit, non ad Theologum, sed ad Philosophum spectat", *ibid.*

³³ "Huiusmodi autem Deum metuendum sola facit religio, cuius et nomen et omen tractum est a metu. Unde sepulcra et iura religiosa dicebantur, quia metus erat ea violare, et veteres valde anxii erant in ceremoniis suis, timentes magnum aliquod malum, si in iis secus aliquid aut dictum, aut factum esset, quam praescriptum erat", *ibid.* 195.

the Christian —whether Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist or Antitrinitarian—is atheist. These confessions differ from each other namely regarding only certain opinions that contradict not the least with the power and nature of religion in itself.³⁴

These lines prove Francken’s preference for the idea of reducing religious plurality to one religion hiding “behind” the manifold forms of religious experiences, rites and institutions. Reducing religious differences to a unique concept of religion and God necessitates a solid metaphysics of God, a concept of rational theology. But exactly this solid metaphysics had already been refuted in Francken’s *Disputatio*. At first sight, Francken’s doctrines in *Disputatio* and in *Spectrum* do not seem to fit each other, because the former atheistic work does not allow for any rational theology which is clearly presupposed by the latter’s concept of tolerance.

However, if we turn to the political rhetorics of Francken’s intellectual self-fashioning in his *Spectrum*, we encounter some implications of the atheism in *Disputatio*, and find that the two texts are more in agreement than the rational theology vs. atheism opposition would indicate. *Spectrum* uses a metaphorical language to express the author’s existential uncertainty in the given political and confessional circumstances with the means of self-irony. The whole title of the essay reads: *The Daily Specter of Christian Francken’s Genius Appearing in front of Simone Simoni’s Evil Genius*. Francken repeats the idioms introduced by the Italian philosopher and physician Simone Simoni in a preceding pamphlet.³⁵ Simoni had devised a fictive scene of a dialogue between his own and Francken’s genius in the manner of Lucianus, in which the German thinker was accused of atheism. Francken’s text complicates the fictive polemic by presenting himself with strong irony in his Preface dedicated to Sigismund Báthory, the actual prince of Transylvania.

Because I, as a pygmy, have to fight with such a great Giant, I am forced to hide at least into the *shadow* of Your most illustrious Highness’ *name* – if not into Your grace and favour. But if I will not be judged to be worthy even for this shadow, as I suspect, I will not risk fighting with Simoni’s evil genius, instead, the daily *specter* of my genius will appear, awakened by him calling me a night monster.³⁶

³⁴ “Quiquunque ergo notionem illam DEI reverenter et religiose habent, hoc est ad substantiam quandam invisibilem, aeternam, infinitam, omnia videntem, praemia virtutibus, supplicia peccatis statuentem applicant, hi omnes religiosi vocantur. Itaque nec Iudaeus, nec Machometanus, nec Christianus est Atheus, sive sit Catholicus, sive Lutheranus, sive Calvinianus, sive Arianus. Discrepant tantum hae familiae certis quibusdam opinionibus, quae ipsam religionis vim et naturam minime laedunt”, *ibid.* 196 (my translation and italics – JS).

³⁵ Simoni 1590, fol. A3r

³⁶ “Cum hoc tanto gigante Pygmaeus ego congressurus, cogor illustrissimae celsitudinis tuae, si non gratia et favore, at nominis saltem umbra aliqua me tegere. Quod si nec hac dignus umbra iudicabor, sicuti auguror, non ipse cum Simonis Genio malo pugnare audebo,

To be able to interpret the curious phrase “*the shadow of ... name*”, Francken’s description of the intellectual’s social position has to be paid attention to. Plato’s image of the flying of the winged mind from his Chariot Allegory (cf. *Phaedrus* 246a–254e)³⁷ served as the basic metaphor for characterizing the intellectual’s way of life in several works of the German philosopher.³⁸ Against this Platonic background, the use of figurative speech configures a scheme of reversed Platonism and refers to the nondiscursiveness of the political sphere. Francken describes the flying of the philosopher’s mind as an *inaccessible* state of existence; it proves to be mere curiosity which causes one to lose the soul’s peace and stillness.³⁹ Therefore, the metaphor can be read as follows: if the Anselmian concept of God was normatively accessible to each member of mankind belonging to any religion then the minds of each member of mankind would be able to realize the ideal of metaphysical flying. But the latter is denied by Francken, he confesses that even he himself cannot experience intellectual transcendence; metaphysical soaring lies beyond the intellectual’s reach, once metaphysics has collapsed. The Platonic order of the world and of names denoting things in the world should configure a three-part structure as follows: first ideality (God), then the world with things in it, finally names denoting things in the world. However, the refutation of rational theology implies no rational order in the world, and an irrational world makes names unable to denote things in a proper sense. Figuratively speaking, the transcendental soaring of the winged mind and real-political speech are irreconcilable with each other. The sphere of politics has no metaphysical ground and it cannot be deduced from metaphysics – this very fact implies the need to abandon the *discursive* use of speech and to choose *metaphors* arbitrarily, instead of names denoting things that exist in a proper order of the world. The “shadow of the most illustrious Highness’ (i.e. Sigismund Báthori’s, the Prince’s of Transylvania) name” means therefore a place of nothing, an instance of ontological vacuum which should express the intellectual’s asylum in a given political reality. Francken’s self-satirical introduction himself as a *daily specter* who is unworthy even for the shadow of the Prince’s name reveals the irrational order of politics and the impossibility of philosophical use of speech with proper meanings.

sed genii mei veniet spectrum diurnum, quod ille excitavit, monstrum noctis me appellans”, Francken 1590/2008b, 186 (my translation and italics – JS).

³⁷ “[...] Genius meus in eos incidit homines, qui veluti corporis vinculis soluti, celeri atque arduo volatu caelum ipsum transcendere, et Deum in sua essentiaprehendere conantur”, *ibid.* 201.

³⁸ Francken 1591/1972, 254 and Francken 1595, Bv.

³⁹ “Qua nimia curiositate [...] amisit [scil. Francken – JS] animi pacem et tranquillitatem [...]”, Francken 1590/2008b, 201.

III. CONCLUSION

The concepts of tolerance⁴⁰ before John Locke's *Letter concerning toleration* (1689) were generally dependent on a theologically indifferent metaphysical background behind the plurality of religious convictions and of political interests. However, the atheism of Francken's *Disputatio* destroyed this metaphysical setting. The destruction of the metaphysical setting resulted in the annihilation of political values: the impossibility of their constitution and of denoting them by discursive speech. Despite Francken's strong commitment for religious freedom and peace, his vision does not include the possibility of religions standing side by side, on a foundation cemented by metaphysics. The Dedication in the Preface of Francken's *Spectrum* draws the conclusion that the systems of values in the world are expressed in respectively incommensurable political and religious usages of speech which cannot be intermediated. The philosopher who is unworthy even of the shadow of the Prince's name is not the philosopher of religious tolerance but that of the *incommensurability of religions*. The emancipation of each religion and each Christian denomination from being atheist is based on Francken's conviction concerning this very incommensurability. The German philosopher probably wrote the first atheistic text in the history of European philosophy, and he had to face the paradoxical implication that there remained no possibility for any metaphysical concept of God after the holistic critique against theistic argumentations. And yet, early modern conceptions of tolerance were in sore need of a philosophical concept of God. Maintaining the incompatible ideas of religious tolerance and theoretical atheism at the same time led Francken to give up the ideal of philosophical speech. Instead, he began to use metaphors to describe political and confessional reality and the chances of an intellectual conduct of life in everyday life.

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⁴⁰ Significantly in Cusanus' *De pace fidei* (1453, cf. Cusanus, Nicolaus 1453/1970) or Bodin's *Colloquium Heptaplomeres* (ca. 1590, cf. Bodin ca. 1590/1857).

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