

Foreword

In this book I have tried to bring together some of the ideas I have developed over the past few years, the product for the most part of the many talks I have given in academic and church contexts, as well as adult education institutions. I was less concerned here than in some of my other books to rigorously pursue a single train of thought. The present work has instead been shaped by my responses to questions that have been put to me. This does not, of course, excuse me from ensuring that my answers to these questions are mutually compatible.

The book's title and subtitle indicate its basic thesis and central concern. They also allude to the two thinkers who have done most to shape my engagement with the questions dealt with here: the contemporary Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor and the great German Protestant theologian, historian of Christianity, sociologist of religion, and historical theorist Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923).

Faith as an Option builds on the ideas presented in my earlier book *Do We Need Religion?* There the focus was on the description and analysis of religious experiences, or of all those experiences that I characterize more broadly as involving “self-transcendence,” and on the problems inherent in articulating such experiences. As far as contemporary religious trends are concerned, such as an increased individualization of faith, I also sought to show that “choice,” seemingly the perfect concept for describing these trends, is in fact ill-suited to the phenomena of religious experience and has gained traction largely because of the predilection for an economic vocabulary, so widespread in the contemporary zeitgeist. The title of the present work (*Faith as an Option*) may create the impression that I have now succumbed to the zeitgeist I have just criticized. But this is not the case. As some readers will immediately notice, the concept of option is in fact a way of taking seriously the basic insights of one of the most

important books published on the topic of religion over the past few years. I refer here to Charles Taylor's monumental *A Secular Age* (2007),¹ whose main accomplishment is to have studied the rise of a so-called secular option, chiefly in the eighteenth century, in light of its prehistory, enforcement and impact. The rise of this secular option entails a fundamental shift in the preconditions for faith. Ever since this shift, believers have had to justify their particular faith, such as the Christian, not just as a specific confession or with respect to other religions, but also as such, as faith per se—vis-à-vis a lack of faith that was initially legitimized as a possibility and then, as I argue in chapter 3 below, “normalized” in certain countries and milieus. Of course, the rise of the secular option should not be understood as the cause of secularization; but it does establish it as a possibility. In the first instance, then, the optionality of faith arises from the fact that it has in principle become possible not to believe, and subsequently from the conditions of religious pluralism as well. This changes nothing about the fact that the unavoidable decision to embrace either faith or nonfaith or to take up one of the various religious options is not a choice as understood by economists. The book's epigraph from John Updike makes it clear that not every use of the word “choose” implies an economic choice.

Whereas the book's main title thus alludes to Charles Taylor, its subtitle is a reference to Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch was also central to my 2013 book *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights*.² In that case, it was chiefly because I claimed him as a pioneer of my method of “affirmative genealogy,” a specific linkage of historical reconstruction and value justification. In the present book, Troeltsch plays a central role because, like few others, rather than seeking to ensure the survival of the Christian faith through withdrawal and isolation, he made what I regard as an exemplary attempt to think it through afresh in light of the most up-to-date historical research, psychology, sociology, and other sciences. It is surely redundant to add that taking him as a role model in this way does not necessarily mean that I agree entirely with his theological doctrines; given our different confessions, it would be astonishing if I did.

Because in many ways this book came about through a process of public dialogue, by taking up ideas generated through discussions in the institutions mentioned above, I am unable to list the many organizers and interlocutors individually and can merely express my thanks in a general

sense. But I would like to emphasize the tremendous role in the genesis of this book played by my time as fellow at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin) during the 2005–6 academic year. I am particularly grateful to Dieter Grimm, its director at the time, and the members of the “Religion and Contingency” research group, which I convened. The group included not only Charles Taylor, who discussed his great book with us during this period, as well as completing it, but José Casanova, Ingolf Dalferth, Horst Dreier, Astrid Reuter, and Abdolkarim Soroush. I would also like to mention that Paul Michael Zulehner’s invitation to give a series of lectures analyzing the contemporary era from a sociology of religion angle as visiting professor at the University of Vienna during the summer semester of 2007 went a long way to helping me systematize my ideas. In addition, much of what you will read in this book corresponds to the central thematic focus of the research group on “Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective,” which has been generously supported by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) and forms part of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies (Max-Weber-Kolleg) at the University of Erfurt. This group, however, tackles its research topics within a much broader historical framework. I am grateful to my colleagues in the research group for intellectual stimulation of many kinds. In addition to my wife, Heidrun, I would also like to thank Bettina Hollstein, Wolfgang Knöbl, and Christian Polke, who provided critical feedback on the manuscript, and Jonas Lindner, who once again provided valuable help. The outstanding working conditions at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) made it much easier to complete this book, for which I am truly grateful.

But the book is dedicated to my beloved grandmother Gertraud Buckel, née Grimm (May 12, 1885—October 8, 1969), for whom non-believers were still exotic. Rather than being optional, faith was a self-evident and central aspect of her way of life.