Editorial: Orientation

ENGLISH

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Since Jürgen Habermas proclaimed a "new obscurity" in 1985, societal complexities have only increased. People and organisations alike face challenges in navigating evermore fragmented environments dominated by uncertainty. As a consequence of this continued trajectory, commonly accepted normative concepts and value systems are losing relevance, while models of orientation and meaning-making become increasingly pluralistic and individualistic. Yet even pluralistic and individualistic societies depend on shared norms and on an orientation to facilitate coexistence, perhaps especially so. Furthermore, people as individuals need orientation and turn to a range of different norms on offer in search of safety and security.

Humans are freedom-oriented beings who *nolens volens* must consider what is good or bad, right or wrong, in order to ultimately distinguish between supposedly good and right behaviour and the opposite. This then forms the basis for appropriately addressing the question of who they are—a question everyone asks of themselves and embodies, practically, in how they conduct their life. Therefore, competencies that enable individuals and collectives to find and implement practical and behaviour-relevant answers to the fundamental questions guiding their actions are particularly important.

The growing human need for orientation can be explained through the context that determines human behaviour and which is characterised by a high degree of behavioural uncertainty. It is also further exacerbated by the fundamental open-mindedness of human beings and the influences of detraditionalization, liberalisation and pluralisation trajectories of Western-oriented societies. People encounter an unprecedented and diverse

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spectrum of possibilities for orientation: goals, values, norms, life scripts. At the same time—and paradoxically—people are required to determine their own guiding principles by exercising, and continually sustaining, their autonomy. Everyone might reach a vastly different conclusion, but everyone demonstrates and embodies their specific answers—quite literally practically—through their actions. An adequate understanding of human behavioural orientation must therefore consider the multi-perspectival character of interpretative efforts. This has given rise to new normative discourses and offerings in recent years: On a societal level, "ethics" and "European values" have become a fervently and publicly discussed topic, revealing a quest for community spirit, accountability and social identity. We can see this quest reflected in the questioning of what underpins social cohesion, and what constitutes a cohesive value system. Politics, science, culture, education and the media—subsystems of society—equally seek orientation through normative parameters to follow.

On an individual level, influencers, charismatic religious preachers and public figures have taken over the mantle of providing guidance and goals, not least accelerated by social media. These figures and platforms not only introduce new and alternative norms and models for orientation, but also—and in many cases predominantly—shepherd a return to traditional views and roles rooted in allegedly proven political and religious concepts. They promise an antidote to the disorientation and perceived lack of social values in people's personal and public life. Often, these solutions are presented as a rebellious act and protest against new, liberal norms such as tolerance and diversity.

Traditionally, religion serves as a central point of reference for meaning and orientation—both on a personal and societal level. The Bible and other scriptures offer guidance for navigating uncertainty and change, supporting people in forming behavioural principles and orienting themselves in life. Religious traditions and practices offer frameworks for orientation that follow a higher purpose and claim universal validity, thus presenting a plethora of ideas and actions that theoretically and practically address the human need for orientation while continuing to hold space for new interpretations. What do these guideposts look like today? New religious movements offer alternative ways for finding meaning, whereas established Churches struggle to adapt in a pluralistic society. Additionally and compoundingly, the digital flood of information obscures reliable (re)sources for orientation and encourages scepticism towards traditional authorities of knowledge.

What role do religions and faith communities currently and concretely play in supporting individuals—as well as political, judicial, educational, and media institutions, and society at large—in their search for orientation and meaning? Do traditional religious institutions and their symbolic frameworks still serve as relevant guides for orientation? How can a theological reflection on the concept of orientation contribute towards new impulses for the Church and for society? What are the differences and what is the common ground between religious guidance for finding meaning and orientation, and secular ethical norms? In what way do they encourage or demand commitment? What role do Bible narratives play in creating meaning during times of social insecurity? And how do Churches, faith communities and theology bridge the tension between autonomy and commitment in the search for orientation and norms?

This edition of LIMINA foregrounds orientation—guided by the questions outlined above—and aims to highlight possibilities for navigating a rapidly changing world. It also seeks to understand what gives rise to this need for orientation and what it is that humans ultimately seek—and how this may have changed in the context of current processes of transformation. What are the challenges arising from the flood of information and the dissemination of fake news for traditional and modern offerings for orientation? And do concepts such as resonance or quality of life open up new perspective for (dis)orientation in a complex world? Further, we seek to concretise the explicit and implicit norms and systems of orientation that have emerged in recent years—why they have emerged, what underpins them, and how they take effect. Of particular timely relevance is the question of how to understand the return to traditional normative concepts (e. g. traditionalist or fundamentalist religious concepts, traditional gender roles, nationalism and marriage) in the search for orientation. The contributions in this issue attempt to critically examine these questions, offer potential answers, and encourage further reflections:
In the first article, *Regina Polak* presents the research project "What does Austria believe?", which was conducted in 2023–2024. This representative study empirically captures the concepts of meaning, values and beliefs held by people residing in Austria. Based on five key topics, this article offers insights into the dimensions of societal and personal orientation and corresponding practical theological implications for the Church and pastoral care.
Abdelghafar Salim analyses the normative search for orientation of Muslim refugees based on ethnographic research. He shows how refugees find

their way in a new environment characterised by plurality and multiplicity of options, and in doing so redefine normative views on religion, morality, convention and laws. He describes this process as a form of active navigation between different normative concepts that often also gives rise to irritation.

Philipp Thomas offers a systematic overview of various philosophical approaches for ethical orientation. He sets in contrast Kant's philosophy as a world concept, self-cultivation through virtue ethics, orientation through self-articulation in rational discourse, embodiment of values and cultivation of the heart as cultivation in a moral sense. This comparison reveals that philosophy provides answers to the question of orientation far beyond mere definitions and norms.

Ulrike Sallandt opens up a conversation between theology and indigenous worldviews. She explores indigenous approaches on the basis of Emanuel Levinas' experiences with the aim of thinking beyond anthropocentric concepts. Aspects of community, corporeality and relationality gain a particular focus here. Sallandt's main aim is to find guiding concepts and principles of orientation for a theology that expands beyond logocentric and Eurocentric understandings.

Maike Maria Domsel opens up a discussion on *Gelassenheit* (serenity) as resistance against normative self-narrowing. In response to the mounting pressure on young people today for constant optimisation, to a large degree effected by the dominant force of social media, she proposes *Gelassenheit* as a pedagogical and spiritual counter-tool. *Gelassenheit* as resistance means to regain subjectivity independent of instrumental logics, which can be taught in practice and in particular through religious education.

Michael Ackerl ponders the existential question "Are you floundering or flourishing?" amidst what he diagnoses to be a crisis of orientation in our current multi-optional society that leads to alienation and aimlessness. In response, he promotes resonance and meaning as approaches towards a new form of the good life under current conditions and advocates for reframing individual possibilities for self-realisation as public responsibility.

Andreas Mitterer poses the question whether value pluralism necessarily leads to value relativism and thus orientation relativism; or whether values remain objectively definable within this context of pluralism. He demonstrates that the experience of disorientation in the face of value pluralism can, in fact, lay the ground for evidence-based ethics and determining what is objectively valuable.

Daniel Frank examines the relevance and effectiveness of analogies in ethical arguments. He proposes the theory that ethics is not just a means for orientation but constitutes itself a practice of orientation. Employing analogical arguments in ethical reasoning functions as a temporary and situational tool for navigation that creates its own form of rationality. Although analogies are not facts, Frank understands them as valuable instruments of orientation in addressing uncertain and open moral questions.
Mario Kropf presents a specific case study that exemplifies new challenges for ethical orientation: He analyses the application of AI-based robots for spiritual purposes, for example as dialogue partners to discuss topics of religion or as guides in spiritual practice. In this context, spirituality is understood as an individual's orientation manifested in purpose, transcendence and connectedness. Looking at concrete case studies, Kropf discusses in how far the use of robots in spiritual environments constitutes a distinct domain that has thus for not been sufficiently recognised in the ethical discourse on AI-based robots.
Sonja Huber responds to the resurgence of antisemitism in today's society and demands a reorientation of discourse and action in the Church towards one that puts Jesus' Jewishness at the centre of theory and practice. Analysing lyrics in the *Gotteslob* (Praise of God), she sheds light on the anti-Jewish history of Christianity, which should motivate us to confront and redress this aspect of Christian history more explicitly, in a way that also addresses subtle forms of anti-Judaism. Through this process, the Church may then also support society at large, which still harbours antisemitic attitudes with real-life implications, in reorienting itself.
Finally, *Vito Alexander Vasser Santos Batista* and *Stefan van der Hoek* respond to Andreas Reckwitz' diagnosis of a late-modern "society of loss" by investigating the challenges these questions of loss pose for religious education. They demonstrate how the traditional Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love can serve as resources for orientation and support resilience—not just for individuals but as a relational practice, that by "doing hope" transforms hope into a learnable competence.

We hope you find the articles in this issue to be interesting and engaging, and that LIMINA – Theological perspectives from Graz can be an enriching resource for you.

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Issue Editors, on behalf of the editorial team